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Planning for urbanization in religious tourism destinations: insights from Shirdi, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the urbanization process in religious tourism destinations using the example of Shirdi in India. Shirdi, a town dedicated to worship of a twentieth-century Saint Sai Baba, attracts more than eight million visitors every year. The paper explains how religious tourism economy drives rapid urbanization including demographic change and land-use conversion owing to the infrastructure needs of visitors. It is found that planning mechanisms including the conventional master plan approach have been ineffective in adequately responding to issues such as the proliferation of unauthorized commercial establishments, hotels, lodging and boarding houses; strained infrastructure; and environmental pollution that characterize urbanization in religious tourism destinations.


KEYWORDS

Urbanization; land-use planning; religious tourism destinations; India; Shirdi

1. Introduction

Religious tourism destinations (or pilgrim-towns as conventionally known) are special places where urbanization processes are driven by visitor influxes that visit these places for cultural and religious reasons. A study of urbanization and planning in such places is significant: UNWTO (2011) estimates around 170 million visits to more than 2,000 pilgrim-towns in India and such visits comprise 70–90% of domestic tourism flows (NCAER, 2003; UNWTO, 2011). A domestic tourism survey conducted in 2002 found that 40 of the 50 most frequently visited places had religious significance and that 8 of the top 10 were pilgrim-towns; and that the visitor numbers estimated were massive; 23 million in Tirupati, 18.2 million in Puri, 17 million in Vaishno Devi, 11 million in Haridwar (NCAER, 2003). Such influx drives not only the economy but also urban change in pilgrim-towns; a process that is generic to most religious sites belonging to different faiths across the world (Woodward, 2004; for Mecca, see Henderson, 2010; for sites in Italy, see Presti & Petrillo, 2010). Shackley observes that many such sites ‘have grown from villages to cities as a result of the pilgrim trade’ (2001, p. 9) and many more have experienced rapid urban growth and transformations with burgeoning religious tourism.

Religious tourism is generally understood as a specific type of tourism driven by religious reasons and often associated with holidaymaking (Rinschede, 1992; Tyrakowski,

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1994; Tomasi, 2002). Given the increase in faith travel in recent years, at a recent UNWTO Conference, definition of religious tourism was expanded as 'a form of tourism that has its goal a destination which is able to provide diverse religious resources for the fulfilment of religious and non religious purposes and experiences' (Shinde, 2015, para 3). Such wider connotation draws attention to the destinations whose sustainability and planning is directly related to religious tourism. Yet, religious tourism destinations have only been peripherally discussed for their unique urbanization processes (Nolan & Nolan, 1989; Shackley, 2001; Vukonić, 2002; Shinde, 2007).

This paper aims at examining urban transformation in religious tourism destinations using planning vocabulary that includes concepts of land use, real estate and infrastructure development and the planning mechanisms that address these. It is based on a detailed study of the pilgrim-town of Shirdi in western India. Shirdi is representative of several other Indian pilgrim-towns that are undergoing rapid transformation of their physical environment owing to large-scale religious tourism activities (for Jagannath Puri, refer to Patnaik, 2006; for Tirumala-Tirupati, refer to Shinde, 2007; for Gaya, see Orland & Bellafore, 1990). In doing so, it attempts to explain phenomenon of tourism urbanization in religious tourism destinations and contextualize how contemporary religious geography within a trajectory of historical growth. An understanding of urban processes driven by religious tourism is significant not only for India which has more than 2,000 pilgrim-towns (Shinde, 2007) but across the globe where such places continue to be the most frequently visited tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2011).

This paper is organized in six sections. Following this introduction, in the second section, the concept of tourism urbanization is discussed and expanded for developing a conceptual framework to understand how religious tourism may drive urbanization in religious tourism destinations in India. The third section explains urban planning framework in India so as to examine its relevance for religious tourism sites. Shirdi and its transition from a village to a bustling urban centre is discussed in the fourth section. The fifth section draws on the findings from the fieldwork of Shirdi with regard to intersection of planning mechanism with physical expansion, land-use conversions and urban growth. The concluding section sums up the uniqueness of urbanization processes in religious tourism destinations and its implications for sustainability of religious tourism.

2. Tourism urbanization: implications for religious tourism

In recent years, some attention has been given to understanding how tourism drives urbanization. Based on a study of two ocean-fronting cities in Australia which have sun and sand as their primary attraction, Patrick Mullins defines 'Tourism urbanization' as 'urbanization based on sale and consumption of pleasure' (1991, p. 331). His analysis of urbanization in these places is rooted in the discourse of postmodernity, postmodern city, consumption and commoditization of leisure and services necessary in tourism. His equating of tourism with postmodernism and exhibition of hedonistic pursuits leads to characterization of tourism urbanization as something that is:

- (1) spatially different because it is socially different;
- (2) symbolically distinctive, with the urban symbols acting as lures to tourists;
- (3) distinguished by rapid population and labour force growth;
- (4) distinguished by a flexible system of production;
- (5) distinguished by a form of state intervention which is 'booster &' in style like the postmodern city generally;
- (6)

distinguished by both a mass and customized consumption of pleasure; and (7) distinguished by a resident population which is socially distinctive, because this urbanization is socially different. (Mullins, 1991, p. 331)

These characteristics Mullins examines in case of the Gold Coast and the Sunshine Coast and shows how at the core of tourism urbanization is mass consumption which is met by an increase in labour force in tourism-related services and a corresponding growth in population and urban development. Much of the study is devoted to examining social forces in urbanization, but it is the findings pertaining to the urban form that are more relevant for the subject of the present paper. According to Mullins, the most defining element of the spatial form arising out of tourism urbanization is the “tourist strip” [which represents] the narrow piece of land abutting the beach and extending the length of the coastlines’ (1991, p. 332). He claims that the physical attributes of the coast and climate such as surf, sand and attractive hinterland add to the pleasurable qualities of this tourist space. These attributes also fuel commodification through ‘buildings [that] are mainly for tourist services including holiday accommodation’ (1991, p. 332). Both the natural environment and physical environments ‘evoke distinctive images – images of pleasure, fun, enjoyment etc. – and these are also symbols of postmodernity’ (Mullins, 1991, p. 333). Mullins further argues that the ‘small capitalist and petty bourgeoisie’ play a significant role in developing this form and imagery as they provide ‘the tourist goods and services (e.g. as shopkeepers, restaurateurs) and construct the cities (e.g. as builders, land developers, real estate agents)’ (1991, p. 336). Besides mentioning of the limited and indirect role of state, Mullins’ study does not elaborate on the planning response to this kind of urbanization and skirts the issue by merely suggesting of a conflict between tourist and development interests.

Following Mullins, Gladstone (1998) analysed tourism urbanization in case of eight American cities (categorized as leisure cities and tourism metropolises) and confirmed that a rapid rate of population growth is common to most tourist cities and the land use and physical changes are primarily due to the increased needs of physical infrastructure for tourism services. He further speculates on the relation between the social structure and the nature of tourism consumption in generating ‘symbolically distinctive forms’ in the tourist cities (Gladstone, 1998, p. 7). The distinctive forms are often evident in what are called ‘tourist districts’ where clustering of tourism resources and facilities takes place (Pearce, 2001, p. 933).

Such a phenomenon is evident in Rinschede’s (1986) seminal work in Lourdes, France where he identified three distinct areas (with overlapping boundaries) of pilgrims’ activities; the core area was the ‘religious town’ comprising the shrine, the related accommodation facilities and the devotional articles trade; the second area encompassed greater territory by extending into the business centre and municipal recreation areas (visited mainly by more mobile groups of pilgrims); and the third area expanded into the countryside and was loosely defined by excursions by pilgrims who used private cars and tourist buses. In addition, it was found that the two major access routes to the shrine had intense use of space for pilgrimage-related commercial activities including hotels and souvenir shops (Rinschede, 1986, p. 30). This spatial pattern, in many ways, resonates with the concept of tourist districts in destinations where one finds a core of dense economic activities related to the tourism attraction/product in its vicinity and the density reduces as one move outwards from the core (Gladstone, 2005). With the main attraction at the centre, this represents the core-periphery theory.

Following from the above, it could be said that the centrality and proximity of the main attraction or resource of tourism will have some bearing on spatial manifestation of urbanization processes – this is explored in the next section with particular reference to religious tourism destinations in India.

2.1. Religious tourism destinations in India

There are several types of religious tourism destinations (pilgrim-towns) in India (Bhardwaj, 1997).¹ But common to all are certain spatial processes that emerge owing to the nature of religious activities related to the worship of the presiding deity that devotees engage with. The core of the place is a sacred territory comprising of venerated objects and temples dedicated to the presiding deity and often includes landscape elements such as river, mountain and forests that are related to the deity. There also are religious establishments such as ashrams and monasteries which provide services and spaces for religious activities and contribute to the religious and cultural imagery necessary for religious practice (Heitzman, 1987). Within this territory, routes and patterns of movement are significant and the spatial arrangements are ‘an integral part of the overall pilgrimage experience’ as it created spiritual links to enhance the emotional experience for visitors (Mack, 2002).

At both the physical and material level, the sacred territory is created through a process which involves religious actors, patrons and patronage relationships: patrons often sponsor construction of temples and religious infrastructure to propagate and maintain their own formats of worships and create endowments for continuity of religious service. Emphasizing the centrality of patronage in creating physical space for sectarian traditions in Vrindavan, Shinde and Pinkney (2013, p. 560) observe:

At a god-centred pilgrimage site, the physical landscape changes to accommodate the establishment of an increasing number of sects. Vrindavan ... was originally dominated by four major sects, each of which had established grand temples by the fifteenth century. At present, Vrindavan has more than 5,500 temples dedicated to Krishna – the site’s chief presiding deity. The need for sectarian expressions of religiosity in Vrindavan has produced a landscape of religious diversity that is reflected socially in the numbers of sectarian traditions represented, as well as spatially in terms of religious establishments such as temples and ashrams.

In such a spatial arrangement of religious infrastructure, certain actors play a leading role owing to their hereditary hegemony, ownership of land and access to endowments and resources (Entwistle, 1987). Similar to Vrindavan, other urban centres of Hindu pilgrimage, such as Varanasi, Haridwar and Allahabad, have been highly urbanized for centuries as they house several sub-sects, each having a visible presence in the sacred place through their temples, ashrams, *dharamshalas* for serving their followers (Freitag, 1989; Lochtefeld, 1992). However, temple building and religious infrastructure are generally not considered as factors that contribute to physical transformation in pilgrim-towns (Heitzman, 1987) and consequently have been absent from explanation about urbanization process in pilgrim-towns.

It is these concepts of location of resource, core and periphery, access routes, imagined and real landscapes, religious tourism, patronizing development of a place, and urban growth driven by tourist flows that are brought together in this paper. However, for understanding them in contemporary situation, it is also necessary to understand planning framework for urbanization in Indian towns with specific relevance for pilgrim-towns.

2.2. Planning related to religious tourism in India

Given the focus of the paper on contemporary planning mechanisms relevant for pilgrim-towns, I am sidestepping the rich and extensive literature that exists on planning of towns in India (for details see Das, 1981). Urban planning for all towns including pilgrim-towns largely continues to be standardized (Das, 1981); seldom the extraordinary nature of pilgrim-towns (their sacredness and religious importance) features as a unique characteristic that needs to be addressed in planning (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2004). If any, special attention is given mainly to the heritage value of such places (for instance Vrindavan, Varanasi, Haridwar, etc.) and their importance for being destinations for heritage tourism (Kulshrestha, 2007).

For the present study, it is necessary to examine the planning framework as it exists across the tiered structure of government agencies (federal, state and local). The planning instruments dedicated to guide urbanization evolved only 'towards the end of the third five-year plan (1965–66) [as] state governments agreed to the [Central] Planning Commission's proposal to prepare city development plans' (Das, 1981, p. 56). Consequently, preparation of Master Plans for all important towns became the focus of planning activity. This involved making proposals for future 20 years based on assumptions about economic activities and demographic growth trends and housing and infrastructure needs. Of the Master Plans, Das observes,

The main features of these plans were: a) designing of land use with a future perspective; b) a city without slums, or in other words, a standard 'decent' house for everyone; c) detailed modernized Central Business District (CBD); d) division of major land use into zones, e) an efficient highway and transportation system, and f) adequate community facilities with residential areas divided into 'neighbourhoods'. But most of these beautifully designed maps could not be implemented. (1981, p. 57)

The last remark continues to be relevant even after 25 years of Das' study as most cities follow a similar story of non-implementation of Master Plans and criticism of planning approaches that have contributed to chaotic process of urbanization (Roy, 2009; Adhvaryu, 2011). To ameliorate the situation and provide infrastructure support for urban growth, several other planning mechanisms, policies and projects (e.g. see SRA, JNNURM, etc.) at different levels of governments have been introduced (Adhvaryu, 2011) – a complete review of these is beyond the scope of this paper but some will be discussed specifically in case of Shirdi.

2.3. Methodology

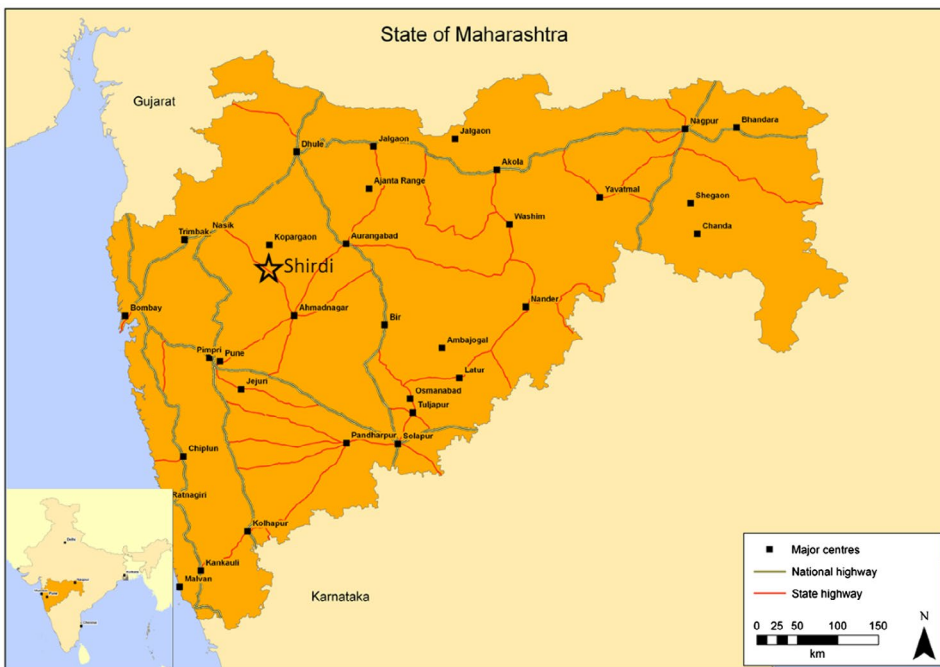
Having introduced urban planning framework and key concepts of land use, visitor flows, spatial patterns and urban growth in pilgrim-towns, the paper now turns to the study of Shirdi. The paper is based on two rounds of fieldwork in Shirdi in 2009 and 2011. The methods involved in-depth interviews with government officials, hotel owners and managers, officials from the Trust, journalists and political leaders (a total of 25 interviews were conducted in the offices of the respondents and each lasted for an average of 45–60 min; in the paper, pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity), participant observation, and review of government documents, protocols, newspapers and biographical research. Being a planner, the author emphasized on collection and analysis of maps and documents related to planning.

3. Shirdi

Shirdi is a pilgrim-town known for devotional worship of Sai Baba, a guru who lived here at the turn of the twentieth century. Shirdi is situated within a circuit connecting three major cities in the state of Maharashtra: Mumbai (300 km), Pune (180 km) and Nashik (100 km) (Map 1). At present, Shirdi receives more than eight million pilgrims annually. The town is administered by a municipal council, is spread over a geographical area of 12.98 km² and has a resident population of about 34,000 (2011 Census).

The shrine of Sai Baba is administered by the Shri Sai Baba Seva Sansthan Trust (SSST), a public trust whose history dates back to 1918 immediately after Sai Baba's death.² The global increase in devotion to Sai Baba, expanding followership and the concomitant boost in visitation to Shirdi are well documented (Rigopoulos, 1993; Srinivas, 1999). Instead of repeating that discussion I focus on how the town has transformed with burgeoning religious tourism and faces issues related to urban growth.

At the time of Sai Baba's death, Shirdi was a village of about 200 houses and a population of around 1,000 people mostly engaged in agriculture-related occupations (Rigopoulos, 1993). A road connecting two important *tehsil* headquarters provided the access to the village and on this road was situated the temple dedicated to Sai Baba. The District Gazetteer of 1976 records the area of the Sai Baba temple as four acres in which the principal temple of Shri Sai Baba, office buildings, cloakrooms, guest house, *dharmashala* and refreshment houses are situated (Kunte, 1976). Alongside are significant structures such as the *Samadhi* (tomb) of Sai Baba, the *gurusthana* (the seat of Sai Baba's guru), a garden known as *Lendi Baug* (raised by Sai Baba), a *masjid* (mosque) known as *Dwarkamai* and *chavdi* (office of the village clerk) where Sai Baba used to sleep on alternate days; all these constitute the sacred



Map 1. Location of Shirdi.

landscape where devotees seek *darshan* (divine sight) of Sai Baba (Narsimhswami, 1965) (refer to Figure 1). To use Rinschede's typology, this temple complex is the sacred core for movement of pilgrims.³ This, in terms of Pearce, may constitute the tourist district which has the basic infrastructure for visitors. The core has expanded over time.

Around this core is the first layer of infrastructure created by SSST which has the mandate to manage pilgrimage activity in and around the temple.⁴ In 1970s, the trust had built about 175 rooms to accommodate visitors. Another trigger for growth was the release of a movie titled of *Shirdi ke Sai Baba* which Kumar (2006, para 8) notes as having a hysteric effect, 'the cult film ... has paid rich dividends to Shirdi's residents. With pilgrims flocking from across the country, the simple mud huts of Sai Baba's early devotees have transformed into brick-and-mortar structures housing small businesses'. By 1990, SSST had built pilgrim-lodges to accommodate about 1,800 visitors (SSST, 1999). Around 1995, SSST constructed a 'Queue complex' – a large 3-storeyed hall for holding up to 10,000 visitors – to ease crowding and facilitate *darshan* of Sai Baba. Another round of expansion included public toilets (capacity of 1,000 users) and lodging facilities in three locations across 16 buildings that added up to 812 rooms to accommodate up to 7,000 people (SSST, 2008). In 2010, SSST constructed a dining hall having a capacity of serving 6,000 people at one time (powered by solar energy) and announced to develop 2 more lodging facilities for accommodation of 15,000 visitors (Behal, 2009). By expanding visitor infrastructure, in a sense, it has also been expanding the sacred territory of movement of devotees.⁵

Some idea of visitor influx in Shirdi can be presented based on the rough estimates made by the author during fieldwork in 2011: the number ranged from 30 to 35,000 daily to about 75–80,000 on weekends and the annual peaks of about 300,000 per day are reached during the three main festivals. The exponential increase in visitor numbers has significant influences on the growth of Shirdi as is discussed in the following paragraphs.

The visitor influx and expanding religious tourism activities have offered economic opportunities leading to migration and a phenomenal increase in resident population, almost doubling every decade (see Figure 2).

In Shirdi, the traditional religious functionary class is absent because of the nature of devotional worship: Sai Baba did not appoint any disciples whose lineages would continue to

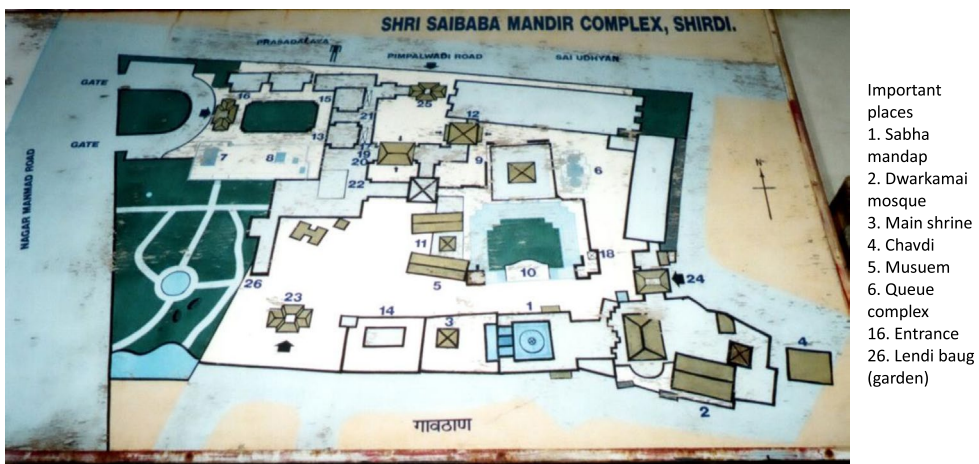


Figure 1. Schematic layout of the Sai Baba temple precinct.

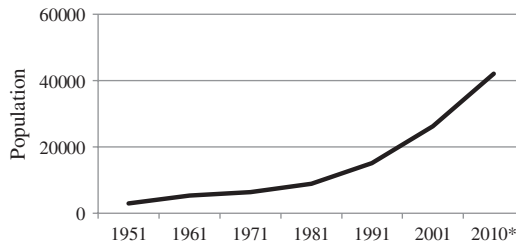


Figure 2. Population growth in Shirdi.

manage the shrine (as is the case with most temples in Hindu tradition) (Srinivas, 1999). This means ‘opportunities are available for other non-religious actors to participate more actively in providing services to visitors and religious tourism economy’ (Sanjay Chandore, shop-keeper, male, 55 years, interviewed on 20 December 2009). Fieldwork information reveals presence of about 500 establishments that provide accommodation, with an estimated capacity of around 7,000 rooms. According to Pradeep Kote (President, Hotel Association of Shirdi, 45 years, interviewed on 23 May 2009), these include around 200 guest houses that offer only lodging facilities and more than 150 private homes that rent out rooms. Of the total number of hotels, only 185 are registered with the municipality. More than half of the hotels are concentrated around the main temple precinct alongside the 2,000-odd commercial establishments that can be categorized into four types: (1) guest houses; (2) permanent and temporary restaurants (around 150–200 at any given time); (3) shops offering Sai Baba novelties and trinkets, such as laminated photos, lockets, picture frames, DVDs, VCDs, audio CDs, images and icons; and (4) shops selling prasad and materials required for temple worship such as garlands and sweets.

Majority of these structures, however, are also categorized as encroachments – illegal and informal. In 2004, *Shirdi Nagar Panchayat* recorded 1,500 such illegal constructions and encroachments surrounding the temple precinct and tried to remove them (PTI, 2004). However, such efforts have met with limited success. Most structures tend to disregard the formal planning framework as they serve informal economy (Roy, 2009) – they come across as opportunistic, exploiting land-use provisions, not adhering to health and safety norms, and devoid of high architectural merit in appearance. They contribute to the heavy density and congestion of residents and visitors in the core area. However, the structures built by SSST follow formal rules and regulations, appear modern with some attention to providing a better lodging experience, thus producing a contrast in the landscape. The emphases of SSST on building hospitals, shopping malls, service apartments and hotels, etc. have reinforced the image of the place as that of an ‘urban city’ but with a religious attraction.

Outside the core is a landscape of a rural settlement. The outlying areas once used for cultivation are now converted into plots and most are earmarked for construction of hotels. Since the land parcels are larger in size, there are possibilities of providing wider road networks and better amenity spaces. This is also the prime area for real estate development: the lifelong devotees want to have a permanent accommodation either in forms of apartments or bungalows and are willing to pay higher price for emotional reasons (staying close to their deity) which then pushes the property prices (Rai, 2007). A simultaneous change is also noted in cultivation practices by Ghoshal and Maity: ‘Earlier people used to cultivate

cereals like *jowari* (millet), wheat etc. but now they switched over to flower cultivation in their agricultural fields which is very much in demand for offering of *pujas* in the Sai Baba temple' (2010, p. 174).

The religious tourism economy is intensely 'commercial' in nature (as compared to the one driven by social and cultural exchanges observed in other traditional pilgrim-towns). A common concern for both private sector and visitors is that except for visiting the shrine there are no other attractions for them to stay in Shirdi. As a response, other touristic alternatives are being offered including package tours to other nearby religious places such as Shani Shingnapur (site dedicated to deity of Shani), Nashik (site of Kumbha Mela), Tryambakeshwar (site dedicated to Shiva) and world heritage sites of Ajanta and Ellora caves. A water park has also come up, which the promoters claim, is doing brisk business (Ramesh Patil, shopkeeper/agent selling tickets for the water park, male, 30 years, interviewed on 26 December 2009). Pradeep Kote (President, Hotel Association of Shirdi, 45 years, interviewed on 23 December 2009) believes that Shirdi is gearing to become a multidimensional religious tourism site where religion and recreation can be experienced simultaneously.

Another factor in land-use change is the rise of sectarian followership that is generally visible in traditional pilgrimage sites (Entwistle, 1987). Deshpande (2005, para 6) points to 'the establishment of a separate colony – Saipattam – for Andhra settlers and devotees [as it] houses an exclusive Sai Baba temple for the community and [that] a bus run by the Andhra Pradesh government gets devotees from the state to this temple every day'. These kind of sectarian followers are serviced by specialized providers both in religious and non-religious aspects (Ghosal & Maity, 2010, p. 176); and such tendencies for creating specific-user-driven religious infrastructure are likely to raise the demand for prime space and real estate development (Deshpande, 2005; Shinde & Pinkney, 2013). The ills of urban growth include different kinds of pollutions and Shirdi is no exception (Tatya Gondkar, Former *sarpanch* – headman of the village, male, 73 years, interviewed on 24 December 2009): traffic jams and vehicular pollution is a regular feature and the levels of noise pollution frequently exceed the acceptable limit for residential areas and institutions like school and hospitals (Kankala & Gaikwad, 2011).

All the indicators – rapid population growth, migration, infrastructure for religious tourism, growing sectarian followership, new tourism attractions and land-use conversions – explain how tourism urbanization is taking place in Shirdi. The dense temple district in the core area of the town and rapidly growing outward areas along the main arterial roads has given Shirdi a unique urban form – that of tentacles where all streets almost come and converge around the temple district. Existing growth begs a question – how have planning interventions addressed the urbanization process in Shirdi?

4. Planning interventions in Shirdi

In this section, I discuss planning mechanisms relevant for Shirdi. Till about 1990, Shirdi had a *Gram Panchayat* as its governing body. It worked 'in collaboration with the Sansthan Committee, local residents and Government officials', but its role was limited to 'the arrangements for supplying potable water to the visitors and requisite sanitary measures [such as anti-cholera inoculations, etc.]' (Kunte, 1976).⁶ In 1990, Shirdi was elevated to a 'C' municipal council for administration by state government. Consequently, the need for better

planning and management of the town was expressed and the first statutory Development Plan (Master Plan) was prepared by the Town Planning Department of the state government under the Section 30 of Maharashtra Regional & Town Planning (MRTP) Act, 1966 and the same was sanctioned in 1992. The Existing Land Use (ELU) survey in this plan (undertaken in the late 1980s) found that developed area was only 8.5% (about 95 ha) and the remaining 92.5% area was agricultural. Within the developed area, 40% was vacant followed by two land uses namely residential and public and semi-public (PSP) that occupied almost equal shares of land (refer to Figure 3). Notably, the temple premises and other areas owned by SSST were included as the PSP land use (Suresh Kerkar, Assistant Town Planner, Shirdi, male, 47 years, interviewed on 19 March 2011).

The plan was prepared for 2011 with a projected total population design population as 27,000 (an addition of 15,000 over the 1990s). In this Proposed Land Use (PLU), the plan designated 142 ha of land for accommodating the growth in population and corresponding public amenities. The remaining area still was zoned as 'agricultural' (refer to Map 2). Although the DP report noted that 'the magnitude of increase in pilgrims itself is a very serious problems which is required to be attended to while formulating Development Plan' (Town Planning Department, 1992, p. 15), the issue was addressed in a fairly limited manner: only 15 ha of land was dedicated for land-use requirements of the floating population of 15,000 (Chief Officer, Shirdi Municipal Council, interviewed on 18 March 2011). Refer to Figure 4 for detailed land-use statement.

To understand the planning proposals, comparing the PLU with ELU is necessary. The plan recognized special characteristics of the place and no industrial use was designated. The residential land use was increased 10 times but commercial land use was increased only twice the existing acreage, which given the intense commercial nature of pilgrimage activity was inadequate (please refer to Map 3 and Figure 4).

Similarly, other supporting land uses also were not increased (see Figure 5). It is questionable if the proposals addressed the requirements of religious tourism and whether the DP achieved its objective of directing urban growth. While the DP overlooked the visitors and their needs, it was also not able to provide adequate land-use zoning and provision of amenities for residents, given the fact that realistic population growth was way beyond the designed population (Bhausahab Kote, former President, Shirdi Municipal Council,

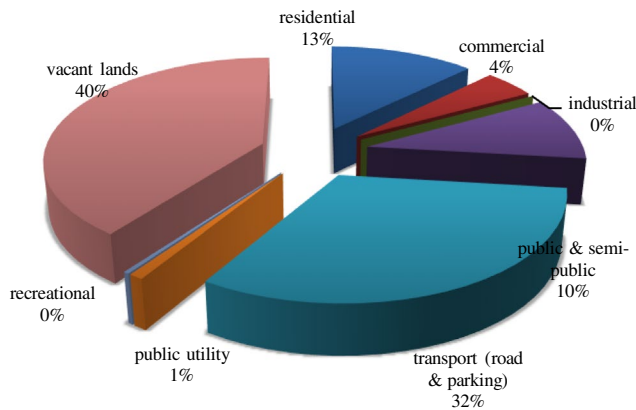
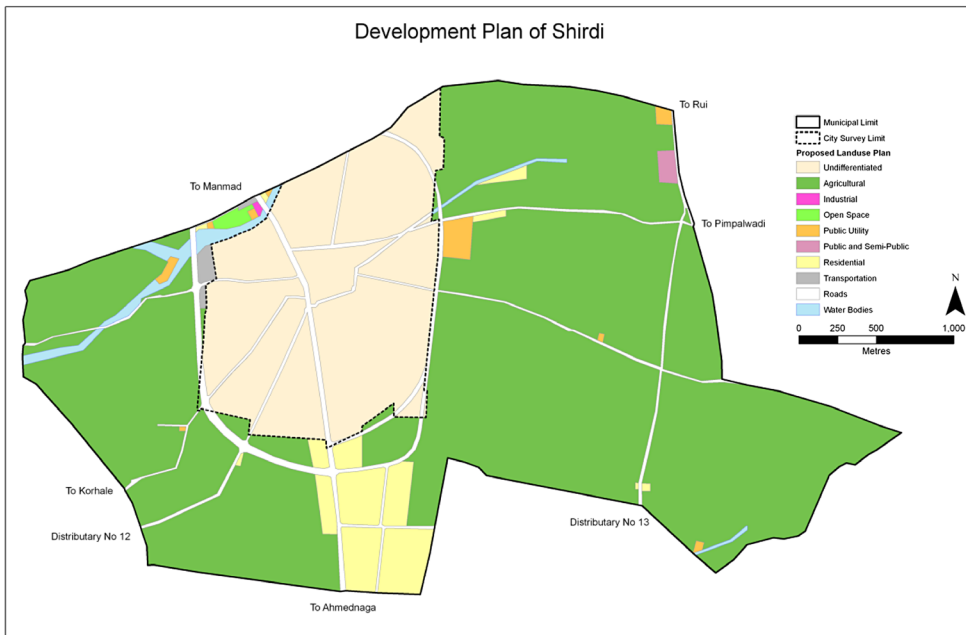


Figure 3. Existing land use within the developed area (95 ha) in the late 1980s.



Map 2. Proposed land use in the Development Plan of Shirdi 1992. Source: Town Planning Department, Maharashtra.

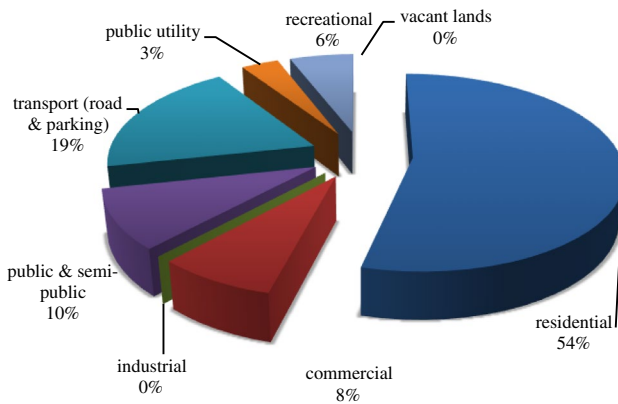
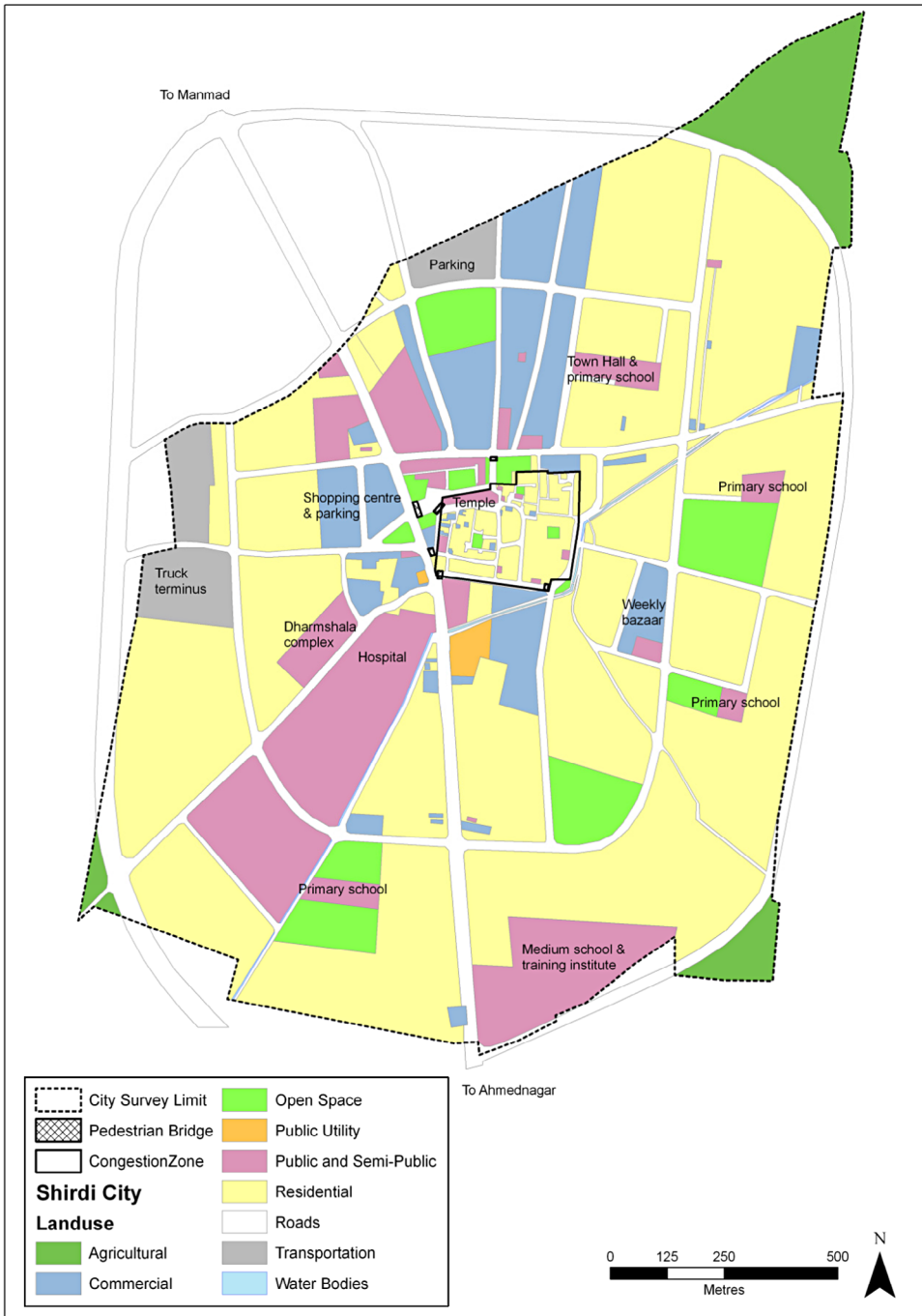


Figure 4. Proposed land-use distribution for the developed area (142 ha). Source: Development Plan Report, 1992.

male, 63 years, interviewed on 19 March 2011). The result was glaring with the haphazard and unplanned growth in the non-designated area of agricultural land use.

Another planning intervention was an *Action Plan for Environmental Improvement at Shirdi* prepared by the state government through Maharashtra Pollution Control Board in 2004. This plan acknowledged that ‘cities with special character like religious importance, tourist interest, etc. need extra care in managing its growth and conserving its environmental resources’ and recommended ‘the principles of eco-city principles and the Guide Lines for



Map 3. Proposed land use in Development Plan of Shirdi, 1992 within the village limit. Source: Town Planning Department, Maharashtra.

developing Shirdi as an Eco-city' (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2004, p. 3). Its proposals were based on categorizing the town in two zones: the 'Pilgrim Zone' of religious activities, and the 'Shirdi Town' of the regular civil life in the town (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2004, p. 1).

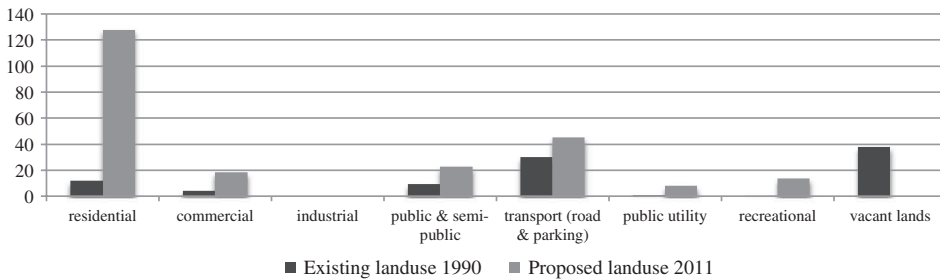


Figure 5. Comparison between existing and proposed land use within the developed area.

The intention of the plan to invest in infrastructure was correct, but the costs were to be shared by the state government and local municipality. The municipality did not have a large resident's base for taxation to raise the resources and thus the entire responsibility, by default, was on the state government (Chief Officer, Shirdi Municipal Council, interviewed on 18 March 2011). And the state with its focus on development of other places did not invest much in the recommendations of the plan leaving its fate hanging.

A new direction for planning was envisaged through the formation of *Shirdi Urban Development Authority* (SUDA) in 2009. SUDA's mandate was to plan and develop lands in and around Shirdi covering an area of 106.12 km². (Urban Development Department, 2009, p. 5), but these goals seem to be lofty as noted by a newspaper: '... the Shirdi Development Authority to recast the Shirdi Township on the lines of Tirupati [the most frequented pilgrim-town housing the richest temple in India]. Infrastructure projects valued at Rs 200 crore [INR 20 million] in the temple-town were cleared by the Chief Minister' (Naik, 2009, para 5). Announcements of policies and projects by SUDA triggered speculation in real estate leading to rapid conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural purposes and then selling them for residential and commercial developments (Datta Bothe, Hotel owner, male, 40 years, interviewed on 21 March 2011). The tone of speculation is clear:

The MSRDC is planning to make money from the commercial utilisation of five plots where they have planned malls. It is also planning a multi-layer car park and a 6-km skywalk around the temple. Cafeterias and waiting halls will also be built. The gardens will have amusement park-type facilities and joyrides for children. (Naik, 2009, para 5)

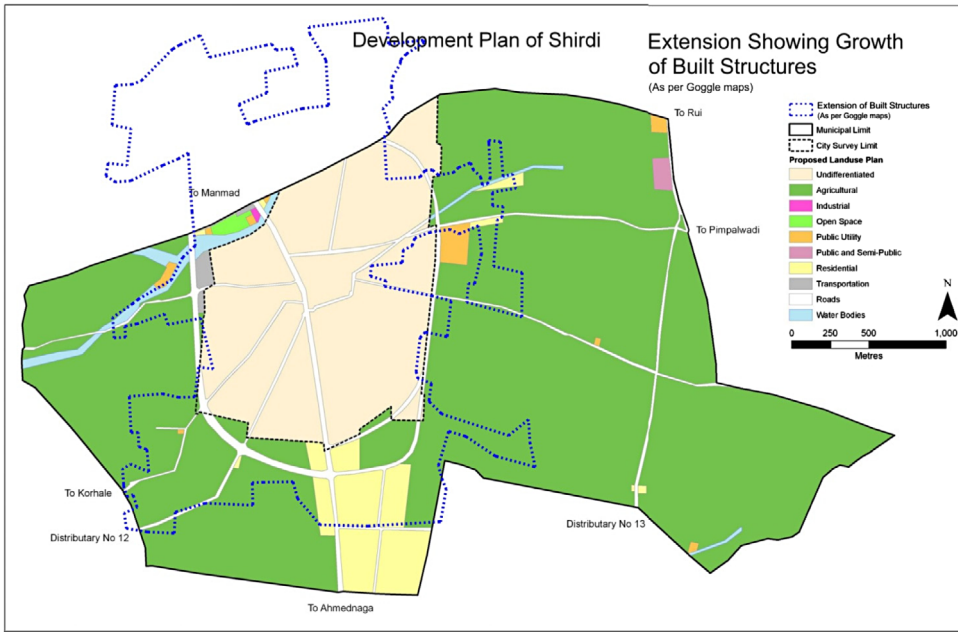
However, SUDA remained on paper without undertaking any serious projects and its presumption that SSST will be actively involved in developing infrastructure projects failed. Rather it triggered more interest in real estate development hitherto unseen. The following blog discussion presented by Behal (2009) succinctly captures the new image of Shirdi as an urban landscape:

rr_sai_bhakt: Malls in Shirdi???

adwaita: Malls I don't know but I saw a Reebok factory outlet on the hi-way just at the entrance of shirdi. Felt happy to see the city developing :).

om sai ram ... Gayatri.

To sum up, planning interventions fuelled physical expansion of the town through land-use conversion 'but without infrastructure that was necessary for tourism' (Bhausahab Kote, former President, Shirdi Municipal Council, male, 63 years, interviewed on 19 March 2011). There is influx of private capital and speculative investments. But it is also a place for



Map 4. The extent of urban growth superimposed over PLU in Development Plan.

encroachments and illegal constructions. This is clearly visible from Map 4 which shows the actual expanse of urbanization (mapped using Google image) and its superimposition over the planned land uses suggested in the Development Plan. Whereas the total proposed area for development was 142 ha in the plan, at present more than 650 ha is already developed. At best, Shirdi appears to have a dense core, but infrastructure is distributed unevenly with concentrations around major access roads flanked by areas of unplanned and unmanaged urban growth.

5. Discussion

The study of Shirdi draws attention to the following characteristics of the urbanization process in religious tourism destinations. As an urban form, the idea of a core and surrounding intense commerce zone holds good for pilgrim-town like Shirdi but the concentric belts as identified by Rinschede (1986) or tourist districts as suggested by Pearce (2001) may not necessarily exist. Instead, there may be pockets of intense activities along access roads, much like a radial city with access roads converging to the core. One of the interviewees pointed out that the core is unplanned with more mixed land use and structures that are dense, unauthorized and illegal but the periphery appears to be planned with some sense of order with wider roads, larger plots and lesser density: this is due to clear and distinct land uses and the enforcement of regulations and approvals necessary for larger establishments (Datta Bothe, Hotel owner, male, 40 years, interviewed on 21 March 2011). Moreover, the core is pedestrian, whereas the radials are for vehicular movement.

Two spatial manifestations or two towns are overlaid over each other – one that of visitors and the other belonging to residents. Within the town of visitors also there is a difference:

the areas under the 'Public Trust' are more formal and structured, whereas the private sector is informal and illegal and unauthorized providing the more flexible labour force as suggested in Mullen's argument about flexible labour force.

The planning interventions, as Nitin Pimpale (Press reporter with a daily newspaper, male, 45 years, interviewed on 19 March 2011) rightly observes, have met with fairly limited success, if any. The reasons are many. The process of preparation of the DP is flawed as demographic projections grossly underestimate the target populations (residents and visitors). Planners were neither able to visualize and take into account the rapid growth in visitor flows and ensuing migration nor seem to be aware of trends in religious tourism (Madhukar Tatkale, Executive Officer, SSST, male, 48 years, interviewed on 21 March 2011). As such, the potential of religious tourism as a key driver of growth remains undermined:

The DP has anticipated a population of 20000 by 2001 at an average growth rate of 32.51%, where as the actual population in 2001 as per the census is 26169 at a growth rate of around 56.0%. These deviations can be attributed to the tourist characters of the town that acts as a catalyst to the socio-economic growth of the town and associated population growth. (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2004, p. 4)

In the DP, the 'zoning proposals' restrict land uses and 'reservations of land for amenities' are prepared to serve the design population, but with rapid population growth planning tries has to 'catch-up' with the demands of increased population. This is where unplanned growth begins: people find places for business and accommodation in unauthorized colonies and settlements. Moreover, the shortfall of public amenities defeats the primary purpose of DP. In the DP, a total of 59 sites were reserved: 44 to be developed by municipal council, 8 for SSST and 7 for other departments of the government. A careful observation shows that only 11 sites have been developed (about 16% implementation): 6 have an explicit commercial purpose for revenue generation for the municipality, while rest are related to widening of roads around the temple complex.⁷ For visitors, only one site was proposed as an amenity in the form of a *Dharmshala* (pilgrim-lodge of 1.5 ha).

The inefficiency SUDA as the special planning authority is also evident. SUDA remained on paper as its constitution is problematic where the authority for decision-making, implementation and execution is concentrated in a board-like structure comprising political leaders and high-level officials; in these, there is only one representative from Shirdi town (Urban Development Department, 2009). All the decisions are to be taken by this group of leaders and bureaucrats, meaning there are bound to be bureaucratic delays in decision-making and implementation. The responsibilities to execute projects are thrust on the state government agencies that are already burdened and lagging behind with regard to their own mandate of service provision. No specific department/agency is given the charge for the development of Shirdi (Bhauasaheb Kote, former President, Shirdi Municipal Council, male, 63 years, interviewed on 19 March 2011). In all this, the strategic importance of Shirdi as a pilgrim-town is lost. SUDA broadly discusses three areas for project proposals: roadwork, construction of buildings and beautification. These focus areas are misplaced: for instance, urban studies have found that widening of roads is no solution to congestion problems and yet, more than 50% of the budget is allocated for roadwork. The building projects and beautification neither address real public infrastructure needs nor help in smooth and efficient conduct of pilgrimage and religious tourism activities and movement of visitors. Rather, such projects add to the speculations about land-use conversions and real estate development. Clearly, existing planning mechanisms as they claim to address issues related to tourism urbanization are inefficient.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the process of tourism urbanization in a religious tourism destination using the example of Shirdi. If one refers to Mullins' (1991, 1994) findings on tourism urbanization in general with findings from Shirdi, similarities are evident in characteristics such as rapid growth in population, increase in labour force and distinct spatial forms. But Mullins' work is on leisure, pleasure and consumption that are markers of postmodernity in Western societies; there are differences with the Indian situation as exemplified in Shirdi. The characteristics referring to the mass consumption of pleasure, boosterist role of state and the activism of residents are not to be found in urbanization driven by religious tourism. While the processes in urbanization may be different due to socio-political and cultural context, the outcome in spatial form is determined by land-use conversions, infrastructure and investments in religious and non-religious infrastructure, and the institutional arrangement that exists for guiding and planning urban growth in tourism destinations. The case of Shirdi demonstrates that the outcome is related to how different stakeholders in religious tourism appropriate the sacred value and religious importance of the place. These findings are also relevant for a wide range of a plethora of religious tourism destinations in India that have grown at a fast pace – both in resident numbers and visitor influx (for instance for Banaras, see Freitag, 1989; for Haridwar, see Lochtefeld, 1992; for Vrindavan, see Shinde, 2012). The same could also resonate with other places across the world known for their religious tourism (Shackley, 2001; Vukonić, 2002; UNWTO, 2011).

The paper makes three significant contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence of religious tourism urbanization – a subject that has neither been discussed in tourism studies or planning research, particularly on non-western sites. The outcome may appear similar, but the processes are quite different where sociocultural values and religious demands drive religious tourism rather than the consumption of pleasure seen in tourism. Second, at conceptual level, it establishes that the process of urbanization in religious tourism is similar to tourism urbanization as discussed by Mullen and Gladstone in their seminal work on the subject. Moving beyond the demographic emphasis in these earlier works, the paper has highlighted *spatial form* as an additional category of analysis in tourism urbanization. The spatial form is better explained using planning vocabulary including land-use conversions and real estate. Moreover, the emphasis on land-use analysis has helped in substantiating the discourse of urbanization in pilgrim-towns where one finds 'one town over the other', each with different needs of planning: tourism destination and/or sacred place; town of visitors and/or residents; mosaic of formal and informal enterprises serving religious tourism. The paper has also demonstrated how the conventional idea of a sacred core and peripheral town-life may not necessarily be true of contemporary religious tourism destinations. Although the town may grow around a core of intense pilgrimage activity, infrastructure development and real estate is driven into other areas as well and directed along major access roads that generates different spatial forms where informality and unauthorized constructions also take a centre stage.

Third, at practical level, the paper draws attention to the need for articulating better planning mechanisms in religious tourism destinations. It argues that the approach of 'Development Plan' and other planning mechanisms have failed owing to the inefficiency that is in-built in the process of making such plans (Adhvaryu, 2011). Similar to failures observed in other towns, proposals remain on paper partly due to flawed process (refer to

Das, 1981) but also for the rigidity of planning frameworks and inability of institutions to account for multidisciplinary nature of urban concerns, i.e. tourism issues related to planning and planning issues in tourism destinations. Even flexible plans are not able to fully take account of visitors and address visitation issues and consequently lead to non-implementation of unrealistic goals. Following Woodward's appeal that 'there is no substitute for holistic urban planning, although there is very little opportunity for this type of approach with regard to most locations' (2004, p. 185), an important question arises – how to plan? One way to think is how the state should shift the focus on activities that help in improving visitor experience (Landorf, 2011) while religious actors contribute in making and maintaining the religious and sacred image of the place. One way or the other it is necessary that the sacred and religious be sustained in wake of rapid urbanization of religious tourism destinations.

Notes

1. I refer to Hindu pilgrim-towns and they are categorized in numerous ways but for this paper, it is necessary to focus on the discrete physical spatial forms that emerge due to the nature of religious activities. At one end of the range are towns built around a single shrine dedicated to one deity (Jindel, 1976) – notable examples include Puri, Nathdwara, Tirumala-Tirupati. At the other end are towns that have multiple shrines dedicated to one presiding deity or multiple deities; archetypal examples include places such as Banaras which has temples dedicated to several deities including Vishnu, Ganehsa, and Shiva, and Hanuman temples or Vrindavan that has more than 5,000 temples .
2. In 1921, after Sai Baba's death, the District Court devised a scheme for administration of the temple and management of the endowments and income that were donated in his name. This scheme called Sai Baba Santhan was revised on regular basis and in 1952 this arrangement was institutionalized as a public trust under the Bombay Public Trust Act. Following litigations, in 1960 the state government appointed a Court Receiver for its management and in 1982 the charity commissioner and the court decided to appoint members of public as Trustees to look after the functioning of the Santhan.
3. Outside the temple complex are five temples; Khandoba temple is the place where Sai Baba was first greeted by local villagers; and four temples of *Gram Devas* (village deities). *Shani, Hanuman, Mahadeo* and *Ganesh*. Other supporting activities exist outside the core.
4. At present, SSST comprises a Board of Trustees consisting of 20 members and an executive officer appointed by the state government who heads the executive wing comprising of about 1,300 employees working across 13 departments. The department for temple management draws up the rituals to be performed daily, weekly and on special occasions, including festivals, and appoints priests to perform rituals in the temple.
5. SSST engages in multifarious activities, which include financial aid for local infrastructure development, health care, employment generation and economic revival of local industry, education and patronizing local culture and tradition.
6. For undertaking such measures, it collected revenue from pilgrimage through a pilgrim tax and a fee from stall-holders during fairs. However, around 1990s, the pilgrim tax was repealed making the *Gram Panchayat* weak in resources and rendering it incapable of doing much for the increasing influx of visitors.
7. There are also instances of changes in purpose of reservations and that leads to conflicts as seen in case of plot near the temple that was reserved for 'garden' but later was 'deserved and proposed to be developed as a commercial complex' [and rightly so] ... 'such decisions could lead to congestion in the temple area defeating an important purpose of the DP' (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2004, p. 5).

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