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Emerging paradigms for development planning: A case of Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala

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Abstract

Thrissur, renowned as the cultural capital of Kerala is a city with a strong legacy of cultural, historic and traditional aspects. It is one of its kind in Kerala with a well-planned ring and radial pattern of development. The paper presents an overview of various aspects of the city development such as history, culture, heritage, geography, environment, demography and trade & commerce based on secondary sources. The growth of the city with respect to its development phases and emerging issues are also discussed. General recommendations for improvement of the city are suggested with regard to the current situation.

Keywords: Thrissur; cultural heritage; development planning

1. Introduction

Thrissur or ‘Thrissivaperur’ is a centrally located district in the state of Kerala. It is also known as ‘the cultural capital of the state’ for its rich history, strong religious and cultural heritage and immense archaeological wealth. One of the better planned towns, the modern Thrissur city owes its origin to the great visionary Sakthan Thampuran (1751-1805), the ruler of the erstwhile kingdom of Cochin.

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The city of Thrissur is developed around a centrally located hillock called ThekkinkaduMaidan (ground of the Teak forests), on top of which is the great temple, the abode of Lord Shiva, ‘Sree Vadakkumnathan’. In fact, Thrissur got its name from the word ‘Thrissivaperur’, which is believed to be derived from the Malayalam words ‘Thiru-Siva-Per-Ur’ which meant ‘the land of the Sacred Lord Siva’. The city developed along road networks in ring and radial pattern originating from the road surrounding the central hillock (Swaraj Round). The early initiatives by its rulers towards trade and commerce sowed the seeds for the economical and cultural development of Thrissur. The religious, cultural, historical and archaeological attractions support a strong potential for the development of tourism as well. Thrissur district also possess an excellent inter-city transportation system with good quality arterial roads including National and State highways. Apart from being the cultural nerve center of Kerala, it is also a major academic hub and is home to several educational institutions. It also locates various state-run institutions in the field of art, literature and allied segments. Major industrial sectors include handloom, pottery, tiles, diamond polishing, automobile tyremouldings, wood and rubber based units, coconut oil extraction, food processing units, etc. Major crops like paddy, tapioca, rubber, ginger, cashew, coconut, areca nut etc. are also grown here. Thrissur is also popular for its prominent gold market and is known as the Gold capital of India. It is also an important center of silk garment trade in Kerala. The city holds the record for the highest number financial institutions, both in government and private sectors and still locates the headquarters of three major scheduled banks. The thriving commercial and financial sectors play an important role in the economy of Thrissur.

2. History

Various archaeological explorations in Thrissur have revealed the presence of human settlements dating from the Stone Age. Megalithic monuments like Menhirs and umbrella stones located in the suburbs provide evidences for these. Various cultures like Buddhism, Jainism, Brahminism and other European influences contributed to political history of Thrissur. The early history of Thrissur is linked with the Chera Dynasty of the Sangam age and that of Kulasekharas of Mahodayapuram who ruled over vast portions of Kerala from 9th-12th century. ‘PerumpadappuSwarupam’ (common name for Kingdom of Cochin) during 12th century, with its headquarters at Mahodayapuram (the present day Kodungalloor), controlled the central region of Kerala. During 14th and 15th centuries, a large part of the present day Thrissur district was occupied by the Zamorins of Calicut. The presence of Kodungalloor, the old harbor of India, attracted European powers for trade which finally led to their domination in the political scenario of Kerala. Portuguese were the first to establish trade relations during the beginning of the 15th century, followed by the Dutch and the English during the 17th century. The internal conflicts which arose in the PerumpadappuSwaroopam helped the Europeans, especially the Dutch to establish their power in the Kerala coast. At the same period Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, the rulers of Mysore lead the battle of destruction called ‘Tipu’sPadayottam’ in the northern and central Kerala constituting the Malabar region, which also had its reverberations in the political history of Thrissur.

The history of modern Thrissur started with Raja Rama Varma IX (Rama VarmaKunhippillaThampuran), ruler of the Kingdom of Cochin, who shifted his capital from Thrippunithura to Thrissur for centrally administering the Kingdom. Renowned as the legendary SakthanThampuran, he masterminded the architecture of Thrissur town. The world famous ThrissurPooram, the annual cultural festival formulated and introduced by him, provided a common social platform for bringing together various communities and still continues to be the most celebrated event in Thrissur.

2.1. City Planning by Sakthan Thampuran

SakthanThampuran planned the city of Thrissur according to the principles enshrined in Arthasasthra of Kautilya[5]. The four major roads that radiate from the centrally located ring road (Swaraj Round) around ‘ThekkinkadMaidan’ and originating from the four sides of Vadakkumnathan temple divides the city into four quarters (ref. Figure 1). The city was planned giving importance to all sectors of the society and definite zoning was adopted for different activities. Eastern region constitute the major residential areas. SakthanThampuran brought 51 Christian families to Thrissur and made them settle down in the south-eastern sector. This earmarked the beginning
of trade and commerce activities in the town. Brahmins were made to settle in north-western sector which paved way for the indigenous textile production in Thrissur. All these initiatives eventually transformed Thrissur into a hub of trade and commerce activities dominated by gold, textile and financial sectors.

![Fig. 1. Plan of Thrissur Fort](source-credited-unknown)

3. Culture And Heritage

The rich cultural heritage and traditional legacy of Thrissur makes it a home to several literary organizations and numerous religious and social activities and festivals, which transformed the city into the cultural hub of the state. *Thrissur Pooram* celebrated during the months of April-May every year is the major cultural attraction of the town. It is popularly known as “Pooram of all Poorams”. Major attractions of Pooram festivities include the *Kudamattom* (umbrella display) and *Vedikkettu* (spectacular fireworks), etc. It is widely portrayed as a cultural highlight par excellence, celebrated in the Malayalam month of “Medam” (mid-April/mid-May). The two century old festival, introduced by Sakthan Thampuran unites people across all barriers of religion and caste. Other cultural attractions include events such as ‘*Pulikali*’ and ‘*Kummattikali*’ during the Onam season, as well as numerous religious festivals and processions of various communities. The town still maintains a harmonious balance between traditional arts and modern values.

Thrissur is renowned for its rich intangible and tangible heritage. The intangibles include various cultural festivities and other religious festivals. The vedic chanting taught in Brahmamad Madom, a residential institution for the study of vedas, has the recognition from UNESCO as an unique intangible heritage. The tangibles include the various built and archaeological heritage sites like palaces, temples, churches, mosques, etc., famous for their architectural excellence and historical importance. The town also locates sites enlisted by INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) and ASI (Archaeological Survey of India). Some of the renowned built heritage of the town include Sree Vadakkunnathan Temple, Sakthan Thampuran Palace, Irattuckira Kovilakam, Lourdes Church, Our Lady of Dolours Basilica, etc. The city is also home to many Government institutions in the field of art and literature such as, Kerala Sahithya Akademi, Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy, School of Drama, Fine Arts College, etc.

4. Geography and Environment

Geographically, the city of Thrissur is located at 10.52°N latitude & 76.21°E longitude, with an altitude of 2.83m above mean sea level, and is a part of the midland regions of Kerala and an extended part of Palakkad plains. The city is developed around ‘Thekkinkadu Maidan’ a 65 acre hillock situated centrally. This hillock constitutes the second highest point in city after the Vilangan Hills and the Kole Wetlands in the suburbs forms its midlands, which act as a natural drainage for the city and protect the city from floods. Natural and man-made water bodies like ponds, rivers and canals also keep the ground water safe from salinity.
Thrissur city features a tropical monsoon climate. Since the region lies in the south western coastal state of Kerala, it experiences only minor variations in diurnal and annual temperature. The maximum average temperature of the city in the summer ranges from 22.5°C to 33°C while winter temperature ranges from 20°C to 29°C. Summer season is followed by the south-west monsoon and retreating monsoon seasons, both generally characterized by heavy showers. The city receives an annual rainfall of 3000mm having around 124 rainy days a year [10]. The winter season is slightly cooler and windy, due to presence of the gap known as the “Palakkad Pass” in the Western Ghats.

The Kole wetlands that extend over 136 sq.km (ref. Figure. 2) satisfies 40% of Kerala’s rice requirement and occupies 1.07% of the total land area of Thrissur, distributed across the Chavakkad and Thrissur taluks of the District [10]. They are part of one of the largest wetland systems in the south-west coast of India, namely VembanadKole and lies between Kecheri River in the north and Chalakkudy River in the south. The flood waters deposit nutrient rich alluvium during rainy season making the wetlands the most fertile soil in Kerala. The Kole wetlands are one of the largest, highly productive and threatened wetlands in Kerala and have been declared for protection in the Ramsar convention.

Water bodies of Thrissur constitute to 3% of the total corporation area which includes 3 major water sources and more than 33 small ponds. Of the four water reservoirs; vadakkechira, thekkkechira, kizhakkechira and padinjarechira, which SakthanThampuran built in the four corners of the city for the purpose of supplying water, thekkkechira and kizhakkechira became extinct owing to the city’s development pressures. The remaining main waterbodies in the corporation area are padinjarechira, vadakkechira, palikkulam and vanjikkulam which have been supporting different varieties of bio-diversity for long, and play a major role in the ground water recharge of the city.

**5. Demography**

According to 2001 census, the total population of Thrissur Corporation was 317526. Thrissur Corporation shares 10.67% of the population of Thrissur district and the district population shares 9.34% of Kerala state.

![Fig. 2. Distribution of Kole lands and water bodies, Source: Understanding Kole Lands in Kerala as a multiple use Wetland Ecosystem](image)

![Fig. 3. (a) Population of Thrissur Corporation; (b) Variation in Gross Population Density, Source: District Spatial Plan Thrissur, 2009](image)
The provisional census data 2011 shows a negative growth rate (-0.61%) of population with an absolute value of 315596. In the central area of the town, the population density is as high as 5196 persons per sq. km, while it is 2836 persons in the outer fringes of the city as per 2001 census. Figure 3a&b shows the population growth statistics of Thrissur Corporation with respect to other major cities of the state.

Census statistics project that the population density is reducing in Thrissur Corporation due to out-migration(Figure 4a). Gross population density of Thrissur Corporation was 3130 persons per sq. km as per 2001 census and 3112 persons/sq.km in 2011 provisional census. Studies reveal that over the years, the residential sector has moved to the fringes leading to commercialization of the central core and most of the buildings which were originally residential were later modified to suit the requirements of the commercial sector.

Drastic reduction in population growth rate is also a major factor of concern. The population growth rate of Thrissur Municipal Corporation during 1991- 2001 is 8.38% and 2001-2011 is 0.61. Figure 4b shows that the population growth rate of the Thrissur Corporation in comparison with the district and the state is very low. The reasons stated being the fast pace of urbanisation in the fringes and better connectivity to other employment centres.

6. Trade and Commerce

Thrissur is well dependent on trade and commerce activities as it contributes to the major share of city’s economy. The city is considered to be one of the major commercial hubs of south India and a prominent hub of jewellery manufacturing activities in the state. The High Road of Thrissur, located in the south-eastern quarter was once the prime centre of jewellery business.

The visionary ruler Sakthan Thampuran was the mastermind behind the growth of Thrissur, who invited Christian families to the city for initiating trade and commerce activities, which marked the foundation of economic development of the town. The south-eastern area of the city locates these Christian residential settlements. Various small markets developed initially which later transformed to wholesale markets and a concentration of such activities prevailed in this region especially at Nayarangadi, Ariyangadi & Erinjeriangadi which enhanced the growth of commercial activity in the city. Banking and finance is another important business sector of Thrissur, initiated by the Christian traders in the form of Chit Funds, which later led to the development of the banking industry in Thrissur. The city still locates the headquarters of many nationalised scheduled banks and non-banking finance companies and contributes significantly to the financial sector activities of the state. The tile industry of Thrissur is also very significant in terms of its variety and is a predominant distributor to different parts of the state and the country.
7. Development Phases

- Until 1810 (ref. Figure 5a): SakthanThampuran developed the traditional town. Forests were cleared to welcome new merchants. Forts and palaces were created around the town. Five roads were constructed which linked religious, trade and administration centers with central core. Trade connection with Cochin also started.

- 1810-1900 (ref. Figure 5b): City administration was taken over by the Diwan. Road and water network were improved. Chirasor tanks were constructed to support agriculture.

- 1900-1950 (ref. Figure 5c): Significant growth and change happened in the city due to the establishment of railway line. Commercial developments remained concentrated towards Swaraj round. Roads were widened and earthened. Residential settlements got dispersed to the periphery. Various educational and cultural institutions were established.

- 1950-2010 (ref. Figure 5d): Road networks were improved thereby decentralizing the traffic. Roads were interconnected with branch roads. Commercial activities spread from the core across the region.

7.1. Land Use Patterns

- 1975 (ref. Figure 6a): Commercial zone developed along the southern edge and spread linearly along the western road of the city. Vacant lands scattered around the city functioned as a transition zone with the adjoining agricultural lands. Residential districts were zoned in distinct locations spread across the central core. Public institutions were established, scattered in different parts of the city.

- 1985 (ref. Figure 6b): Commercial zone remained almost stagnant. Some of the vacant plots were effectively utilized and converted for institutional and residential use. Public institutions grew predominantly in the north-eastern region.
• 1995 (ref. Figure 6c): Spatial dispersion of commercial activities to other prime locations in the city helped to decentralize its concentration from the central core. Intra-city and inter-city connectivity improved with the implementation of new connector and arterial roads. Vacant plots along major roads were converted into commercial establishments.

• 2005 (ref. Figure 6d): Growth of residential land use consuming unused vacant plots leading to urban spread and growth of corporation area. Commercial activities developed radially along the major arterial roads and spread throughout the periphery from the city centre initiating suburban developments.

7.2. Development of Link Roads

The city developed along seven main link roads that originate from swaraj round and connect the city to surrounding urban centers (ref. Figure 7):

• College Road: developed as the linkage road to Coimbatore, one of the main business districts of South India.
• Vivekananda Road (Shornur Road): way to North Kerala developed for trade and commerce activities.
• High Road: developed by Sakthan Thampuran to connect the erstwhile Kingdom of Cochin to Thrissur its administrative centre for carrying out political affairs, later developed into a busy commercial street of the city.
• Palace Road: connects Kollamkode Palace in the north, lined by private and public institutional establishments.
• MG Road: major link to Guruvayur temple, the high-end commercial street of the city and also the route to the district administration centre
• Kuruppam road: busy Commercial Street that links Koodalmanikyam Temple and Kodungalloor Bhagavathy Temple.
• M  O Road: locates the corporation office and many religious and public buildings, and links the city centre with the Sakthan Nagar a prime commercial location in the city.

8. City Governance & Administrative Hierarchy

Thrissur Corporation came into being on 2nd October 2000 with a total area of 101.42 sq.km. It was upgraded to the Corporation status by merging the existing Thrissur municipality and the adjoining Panchayats of Ayyanthole, Ollukara, Koorkanchery, Ollur, Vivelattom and parts of Nadathara with the erstwhile municipal area (ref. Figure 8 a&b).
9. Development Planning

The existing Development Plan for Thrissur was sanctioned in the year 1985 as per G.O. (M.S)No.232/85 dated 31.10.1985, for an area of 32.28 sq.km, consisting of 13 revenue villages. The first development plan laid down policies and programmes for overall development of Thrissur town with the horizon year as 1991. It dealt with distribution of future population in various parts of the town, policies for economic growth, future location of economic activities, upcoming physical developments, management of traffic and transportation, land use zoning, urban infrastructures requirements, policies and programmes for sectoral developments and zoning regulations [8].

The development plan still in force (ref. Figure 9a), prepared 25 years back, when Thrissur was a Municipal town targeted a population of 1.75 lakh by the plan year 1991. The plan area and the population growth and its distribution have changed drastically. Though a new development plan for the year 2010 was prepared according to GO (Rt)No.2766/2009/LSGD dated 24/10/2009(ref. Figure 9b), is yet to come into force.

There is an urgent need for the implementation of a new development plan for the city to check the prevailing unorganised development trends in the region. A new development plan focusing on policies and proposals which will help to resolve the congestion and chaos in the core city and the ongoing unplanned urban sprawl which is also responsive to the culture and heritage of the region is required to tackle the issues of the fast growing Thrissur Corporation. A comprehensive master plan with sustainable and long term goals for land and infrastructure.
development in a planned manner that support new economic activities and facilitate public and private actions is needed to improve the quality of life of the region.

10. Issues

Thrissur city is facing various challenges in terms of traffic management, inadequate infrastructure, environmental issues, planning and developmental issues, etc.

Major vehicular problems include heavy traffic congestion due to the mix of intra city and inter city traffic. This is due to the absence of appropriate road networks and inappropriate location of bus terminals and wholesale markets in the city core. Mixed traffic conditions with slow moving vehicles on critical road sections create difficulty for the intra-city commuters. Encroachment of the right of way for non-transport purposes as well as absence of planned bus bays worsens the situation. High Trip attraction to the old CBD around swaraj round increases the vehicular congestion. Most of the intersections are not scientifically designed coupled with bad road conditions add to the traffic chaos in the city. The high pedestrian volume and inadequate facilities for pedestrian movement and encroachments on the road edge by commercial establishments and vendors especially in the city core is another major issue. The major link roads radiating from the swaraj round require special attention in terms of providing facilities for pedestrians and physically challenged.

The ever escalating land values in the CBD have resulted in migration of people to the fringes for residential purposes. The vertical residential developments in the immediate outskirts of the city core and the suburbs due to high land prices within the city are giving rise to unorganized urban growth and illegal land filling. Moreover as per the existing Development Plan the core city has been recognized as the major commercial centre of Thrissur District which has resulted in the conversion of prime residential land for commercial purposes.

Lack of emphasis in policies and programmes for the improving the industrial sector have resulted in the decrease of industrial activities over the years within the city. A reduction in park and open spaces within the city has occurred due to its conversion to other land uses. Studies reveal that an area of 3.81% (1.23 sq.km.) within the corporation limit are vacant land holdings, mostly productive land which are currently not under cultivation and are in the process of conversion for real estate purposes.

The large scale construction activities in the corporation area have blocked the natural water sources to their water bodies and have become stagnant. The dumping of wastes into these water bodies have led to dense growth of algal mass, water hyacinth and weeds causing decrease in oxygen content affecting aquatic ecosystems. Reduced ground water percolations due to hard paving, buildings and roads have drastically reduced ground water availability in Thrissur. Lack of proper solid waste management systems and sewage treatment mechanisms have led to dumping of solid wastes and outflow of sewage to these water bodies which makes its condition even worse. Increasing urbanisation and high density of residential developments generates a large amount of sewage and solid wastes. Many sanitary landfill sites for dumping solid wastes has been shut down due to civic protests which was a severe blow to the solid waste disposal mechanism of the city. Various collection units have been opened by the Corporation for collecting non-biodegradable wastes, but lack of awareness among citizens leads to under utilization of such facilities. Solid waste disposal and sewage treatment are hence critical issue that needs to be dealt with in the context of Thrissur.

11. Inferences and Conclusions

The 200 year old town of Thrissur is rich in cultural and religious heritage. Due to fast pace of urbanization, the city is becoming more and more modernised and is losing its traditional character. As Thrissur has a prominent position in the archaeological, cultural, heritage and traditional legacies of the State, a responsive attitude and mindful conservation of these would enhance the overall character of the city. The traditional CBD and the old market area needs careful restoration through guided planning and need based interventions. Careful demarcation
of heritage zones with strict zoning regulations based on thorough documentation and research of the prominent archaeological, historical and religious precincts is an urgent need to preserve the distinct features of Thrissur town.

Environmental issues needs to be resolved effectively for achieving a balanced and sustainable development of the region. Water bodies, wetlands and other ecologically and environmentally sensitive area should be conserved with strict regulations against pollution and encroachments due to development pressures. The Kole wetland rich in biodiversity, which also serves as a natural drain for the district, needs strict regulations for its preservation. Being the potential water recharge sources and natural drain for the city, the main reservoirs like, Vadakkechira, Padinjarechira, Pallikkulam, etc. needs careful maintenance and preservation to avoid future water shortages and flooding.

An efficient road network and effective traffic management and monitoring system along with scientific improvisation of important city nodes and intersections is required to solve the existing chaos and congestion in the city core. Encouraging pedestrianisation and cycling at strategic locations in the city and implementation of reliable and sustainable public transportation system to decongest the city core, will not only help to improve the quality of life of the city dwellers but also reduce air and noise pollution to a larger extent. Efficient and technical methods needs be adopted for the effective management and disposal of solid waste and sewage to reduce land and water pollution.

All pertinent issues affecting the quality of life of the city dwellers needs to be resolved through comprehensive development regulations which is more responsive to the legacies of the past and futuristic in its approach. The diverse culture and cultural harmony, architectural plurality (modern versus traditional), innumerous heritages and religious edifices, exclusive festivals and events, biodiversity and sensitive ecosystems are a few among the many treasures the city can always boast of. Invoking awareness among public and careful consideration of all these aspects along with effective implementation of a master plan with a futuristic vision that address all issues the city currently confronts is the need of the hour for improving the quality of life in the city. An integrated approach between governmental and non-governmental city planning and development agencies and a conceived effort for achieving planned development and guided urbanization is required to ensure a sustainable future for the city.

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