Sufi Circles | The Living Settlements
A case of Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti

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Abstract: It is a truth universally acknowledged that religious and cultural epicenters have been the loadstone of civilization. The settlements that evolve around these are usually allowed to flourish despite the in-verbatim change in political climate, because while the populace takes a change in political leadership into its stride, any attempt to annihilate the religious belief system is met with rage and unparalleled resistance. An untampered continuity of the settlement’s footprint is therefore found in such areas. Noticeably, such settlements have features that collaborate with the typical lifestyle, derived from the belief system of this populace. It therefore becomes imperative that one also remarks upon what has become extinct with time and which typical features have stood since the inception of the settlement. A study of such living settlement would thus require perusal of not just the morphological footprints but also the socio-political, economic, cultural and religious aspects within the comparative framework of time and space. This research paper aims to look into these very aspects of the Sufi Dargahs that have fostered the growth of many medieval settlements around these epicenters and to understand the various aspects and changes in political and economic climate of the nation and also the preserved cultural and historic legacy which has ensured that these settlements remain one of the few remaining bastions of continuous settlements that have lived and sustained through the last millennia.

Key words: Urban Villages; Sufism; sustainable settlements; socio-cultural; Heritage settlements

1. Introduction
It is an acceptable fact that religious and cultural centers have always been the focus of every settlement. These religious centers, in our case the Sufi Dargahs, are the reasons that settlements thrive and expand vigorously towards utopia. It thus becomes exigent that the settlements which grow near these Dargahs or Sufi centers flourish in spite the change in the political conditions. These settlements showcase the perfect example of a sustainable growth. These factors and certain religious beliefs not only make the settlement sustainable but attract many eyes towards it. And thus, in spite of all the rich historic and cultural legacy, human greed and want are few abominable factors which tend to push anything towards physical dystopia. But still, in spite of all the chaos and degeneration taking place, these settlements still survive keeping the socio-cultural conditions alive, carrying the legacy bestowed within.

In order to understand about the Sufi circles, let us first understand what Sufi or Sufism is.

2. What is Sufism?

“Sufism is a path for reaching the divine power through –MOHABBAT (love), TARIQAT (the right path), SHARIYAT (Islamic laws) keeping in mind the HAQIQAT (the truth).”
-Late khwaja Syed Islamuddin Nizami (Imaam & head priest Dargah Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya)

The literal meaning of the word “Sufi” is “woolen” although the wearing of the woolen does not appear to have been an extensive practice among the Sufis. The word, however was first applied to a small group of mystics who wore woolen clothes. The word “Sufi” derives from the Arabic language. It’s root word is traced to safā, which in Arabic means “purity”. Another origin is sıf “wool” in Arabic, basically referring to the woolen cloaks the early Muslim ascetics wore in Arabia. Another literal meaning of the word “Sufi” actually means “one who is chosen as an intimate friend”. According to Sufism, God’s presence permeates the whole universe and it is through devotion that man can transcend the material world, perceive divine truth and become one with him. Sufis address God Almighty as the beloved. Death is the union of the Sufi and his beloved. This union is only possible through mohabbat (loving the almighty and treating everyone nicely), tariqat (following the way told by the almighty and guided by the prophet s.a.w), shariyat (Islamic laws), and haqiqat (the divine truth).
The term Sufism came into being, not by Islamic texts or Sufis themselves but by British Orientalists who wanted to create an artificial divide between what they found attractive in Islamic civilization (i.e. Islamic Spirituality) and the negative stereotypes that were present in Britain about Islam.¹

There have been many prominent Sufi saints known worldwide, in which the name of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya stands high. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya R.A represents one of the highest orders of Sufi saints worldwide.

3. About the settlement.
Located in Delhi, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya’s Dargah is one of the most venerated Sufi shrines in India. Millions of people of all faith visit the Dargah every year. Devotees believe that the spiritual vibrations of the saint are palpable even today and that the saint will intercede on their behalf to present their wishes to the almighty. The Nizamuddin Basti is a rich reflection of the culture and history for the last 750 years. The most interesting feature that makes this place noticeable is that it has structures, built in different periods under different rulers.

Though very centrally located and very conveniently connected, its link to the urbanity of the city is just a mere pass-by situation. The Basti houses approximately 1500 households. The densities have tremendously grown with the rise in population. The Nizamuddin Basti has grown over the past few decades to accommodate not only the traditional residents of the area but also people from across the country that have come to the capital city of Delhi in search of better livelihood opportunities. In terms of population composition, the migrated population mostly belongs to Western Uttar Pradesh (Amroha, Moradabad and Meerut). Recent migrants especially in Nizam Nagar are from the North eastern states - the states of Bihar and Jharkhand. In addition, on an average nearly 500-1000 pilgrims visit the Dargah on a daily basis and this number can go up to 5000 per day during the Urs celebrations that happen twice in a year. In addition to the Dargah, the Markaz attracts many visitors to the Basti on a regular basis. Over the years, the continuous patronage of the Dargah has also generated a range of commercial activities especially in the informal sector.

4. How it all began.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was born in Badaun, a small village in Uttar Pradesh. His actual name was Hazrat Mohd. Bin Ahmed bin Ali Al-bukhari. Since his early ages he had an eye for learning. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was the disciple of Hazrat Baba Farid (r.a). After completing his studies, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was sent to Ghiyaspur (the area now known as Nizamuddin) along with his family and some Disciples, to spread the word of Islam. One of the reasons for selecting Ghiyaspur was that it was located near the river Yamuna, which would have definitely acted as a boon for the settlement. And also that Ghiyaspur was located at one of the good trade routes. Climate was good. When Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya came to Ghiyaspur he found that the place had a few people living. So he started living in a hut in Ghiyaspur. He use to pray day and night at Ghiyaspur and for the Friday prayer, he use to go to a mosque in kilokri, just adjacent to Ghiyaspur which was made by sultan Muizuddin Keqabaad. Very soon Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya’s knowledge and pioussness came into the eyes of the people living far and near and this started pulling hundreds of people towards Ghiyaspur everyday.

With the burial of the revered Chishtiya Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in 1325 AD the area became the sacred burial ground of important nobles and emperors from Tughlaq Period (early 14th Century) to the Mughal Period and continues till date. The settlement too began with the rouza (shrine) of the Sufi saint. Maulvi Zafar Hasan tells us in his book 'Monuments of Delhi', in 1920 Ad that the settlement was mainly within the compound walls of Tilangani’s tomb. The inhabitants then were mainly the keepers and the family of the sufi Saint. With time the settlement started growing beyond the boundaries of the Tilangani`s Tomb.

The only structure to pre date Hazrat Nizamuddin's arrival in the area was the laal mahal or Kushti lal, the palace said to have been built by Sultan Balban before he ascended the throne. One of the few surviving structures believed to have been built during the lifetime of the saint was the baoli. The baoli was built in the year 1321-1322 A.D under the supervision of Hazrat Nizamuddin auliya. It is one of the few structures that were built during the saint's own lifetime.

People usually believe that after their death, if they are buried near to a sufi saint, the sufi saint may intercede to the almighty on their behalf and that they would continue to receive the blessing of the saint even after their death. This is one reason that we find large numbers of monuments in the

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¹ Qamar-ul Huda (2003), Striving for Divine Union: Spiritual Exercises for Suhraward Sufis, RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 1–4
vicinity of a Sufi shrine. This thought, and 'the want' to be buried within the proximity of the shrine, catalyzed the growth of the settlement with a variety of monuments from different architectural eras ranging from the Tughlaqs to the Mughals within the compound. The Sufi circle of Nizamuddin carries a rich legacy of not only Architectural marvels but also the intangible heritage within itself.

5. The Socio-cultural paradigm.
The present day neighborhood of Nizamuddin Basti has evolved around the 14th century dargah of the Sufi Chisti saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin auliya. Delhi, in the 13th and 14th centuries had emerged as a great spiritual centre and three of the five great Chistis of the Sultanate period chose to live in Delhi. Their tombs contributed to the development of Delhi as a major pilgrim centre through the centuries. Today a densely packed neighborhood in the heart of the capital city, the area has physically transformed tremendously since the 14th century when it lay largely outside what was then the heart of Delhi.

Apart from the rich historic Architectural significance of this area, there is more to Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti. This Sufi circle showcases one of the best examples of the preserved cultural heritage. The rituals and festivals of the area are practiced with great faith and respect. These rituals have been practiced since the past millennium. Be it the urs of the Sufi saint or the muharram processions, every festival and event has its value and significance and is a parallel projection of the rich cultural legacy this area bestows.

Even with the shift in the political structure the intangible heritage and legacy of the area remains subsisting, untampered and without corruption. This elucidates the thousands of people coming to the Urban village of Nizamuddin Basti everyday to live the 'living settlement'.

Now, Culture has induced a huge economic boost to these settlements. It creates a cerebral potential for the settlement and catalyzes in building the human capital. Apart from this, culture plays an important role in shaping such settlements. It creates an awareness amongst the populace and imbues them with the sense of responsibility towards the area.

The increase in the religious tourism and the receiving of a diversified transients, creates opportunities for economic growth which in turns disparages and minimizes xenophobia within the Basti. Which is why people from all faith, irrespective of their cast, creed, colour and sex are welcomed with open arms. This helps in endorsing social inclusion which in turn reduces crimes within the settlement. Now, a settlement consisting of such strong Architectural and cultural heritage and with a potential for monetary growth, educates the people to understand the importance and their responsibility towards the neighborhood. These parameters, somehow, maneuvers the settlement towards a sustainable growth. If we analyze closely, it becomes imperative that socio-cultural aspects and economic growth go hand in hand. Thus we can say that culture plays a vital role in shaping the local economy and preserving the tangible and the intangible heritage.

6. The Built fabric
The Basti has a very distinctive character of an urban settlement today, which is very indigenous and alive with a definite religio-cultural sentiment and a traditional way of life of the Indo-Muslim populace. It consists of diverse and complex patterns of religious, social, cultural and economic trends which interact in many ways to form the nature and the condition of the Basti. The relationship within these various patterns is constantly changing, giving rise to new and different conditions, some beneficial to the settlement and some absolutely abusive.

Hazrat Nizamuddin is a home for more than a hundred listed monuments with great Architectural significance. Ranging from the Tughlaq styled Lal Mahal to the magnificent Atgah Khan's tomb of the Mughal era.

As earlier discussed, the devotion and the metaphysical want, to be buried near the sufi saint, contrived the rise of the Monuments in the vicinity. Some of the important vicinal structures include the 16th century Humayun's Tomb, the Sunder Nursery of the same era, the Safdarjung Tomb of the 18th century.

It is quite evident that these Sufi circles are always surrounded with such structures, be it Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti, Mehrauli or Chirag Delhi, these Spiritual centers have always attracted many rulers and noblemen.

It is not just the built character but the spatial planning of the area that makes it livable. Though organic in nature, the hierarchy of spaces is quite distinctively visible in the Basti ranging from Chowks, bazaars, chabutras, galiyan, etc. The streets are narrow with haphazard connectivity, each street opens into a bigger street which is further connected to the chowk or a mohalla opening. The micro climate is thus affected and
becomes habitable and comfortable for the populace. These factors altogether constitute to the spatial & built character of the area by providing public gathering spaces for the residents and the transients.

7. Conclusion

The physical planning and forms of houses, the spatial organization and its system of private and public spaces such as choks, bazaars, chabootras of Nizamuddin Basti, illustrate the climate and social set-up as the basis of evolution of the area. The construction techniques are simple using available local materials like mud, bricks, mortar and wood. In spite of variety in house types, the overall architectural vocabulary and language is uniform. The houses illustrate the sequence of activities and interrelation of both public and private spaces and explain the character and lifestyle in Nizamuddin Basti. Evolving out of the social-physical and spiritual context and due to local acceptance of its validity over a period of time, they have become the traditional type of habitat of the people. The Basti has apparently had a life of its own, which is what it makes a unique identity to analyze. Even with such posh neighbours like lodhi colony Lutyen's Delhi, Sunder Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, the area still stands proud. The major features which keeps this place alive is that, it has its own legacy attached with it. It is the historic culture and tradition which has opened several doors for income generation. The major contextual forces shaping these settlements can be enumerated as climate, available materials, technology and culture and the religious beliefs. These forces not only contribute to the form of the habitat, but at times to the development of the life-style of the people as well.

Hence what we analyze here is that the factors which keep this settlement alive are its cultural and historic faces. Due to these two factors and their relativity with the other doesn't let the area to get degenerated socio-economically. But these settlements require suggestions and proposals to keep living in the very pink of their health. In this paper, I thought of sharing few proposals which, I think, could be of great benefit to the Basti. These proposals will only work great if the physical development, cultural development & the socio-economic development is taken into account.

Physical Development must aim at making the Basti a desirable location within the city for the local residents, the Delhiites and also for the tourists. Not to forget to enhance the experience of the pilgrims, improve the Basti's social and physical from within, develop the site as an urban heritage quarter of Delhi. Other issues to be considered are the existing physical settlement patterns, built and un-built; movement patterns – vehicular and pedestrian; parking situation; urban open spaces – public, neighbourhood, and private; special areas – monuments, shrines, graveyards, tombs; land use; density; commercial activities; architectural typology; living conditions – natural light and ventilation requirements; social sub-structure; and physical infrastructure.

Cultural Development should aim at Nizamuddin Basti's rich, diverse and pluralistic religious-cultural traditions representing the cultural heritage of Delhi. Indo-Islamic history provide crucial opportunities for the sustainable development of its urban context and local uniqueness, the quality of life, and substance for urban conservation of its heritage.

Socio-economic development should aim to improve the quality of life of the residing population by strengthening basic services in three core areas of health, education and environmental sanitation and to promote livelihoods and economic empowerment opportunities.

8. References


