Embracing Public Space and Urban Cultures:

Understanding and Acting on Complexity of Contemporary Cities

Cultural loci in the urban public realm: Entanglements with sustainability

Shubhi Sonal

Abstract

This paper examines the transformative impact of cultural practices on the urban public realm in Bengaluru, India, while focusing on their entanglements with social sustainability. The first phase of the study locates, defines, and describes the loci of cultural practices using four multiscalar practices from the city. Physical surveys and field observations capture the spatial transformations induced by these practices, including temporal changes in control and spatial extent of the public settings. The second phase analyzes how these transformed settings contribute to social sustainability. This analysis utilizes a two-pronged approach. First, participant observation helps establish the heterogeneity of actors and activities associated with each practice. Second, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders delve deeper into the social sustainability impacts of these practices. A binary assessment framework is devised to establish the link between cultural practices and social sustainability factors. The study argues that while cultural practices breathe life into public spaces, temporary appropriations of public spaces often disrupt city rhythms due to a lack of integration with urban planning. Recognizing these practices and integrating them into the master planning process can enhance the urban public realm and foster social resilience.

KEYWORDS:

Public spaces, culture, festivals, social sustainability, public settings

I cultural loci nello spazio pubblico urbano: implicazioni con la sostenibilità

Questo articolo esamina l'impatto trasformativo delle pratiche culturali sulla sfera pubblica urbana a Bangalore, in India, concentrandosi sui loro legami con la sostenibilità sociale. La prima fase dello studio individua, definisce e descrive i luoghi delle pratiche culturali utilizzando quattro pratiche multiscalari della città. Le indagini fisiche e le osservazioni sul campo catturano le trasformazioni spaziali indotte da queste pratiche, compresi i cambiamenti nel controllo, nei livelli di accesso e nell'estensione spaziale degli ambienti pubblici. La seconda fase analizza il modo in cui questi ambienti trasformati contribuiscono alla sostenibilità sociale. Questa analisi utilizza un duplice approccio. Innanzitutto, l'osservazione partecipante aiuta a stabilire l'eterogeneità degli attori e delle attività associate a ciascuna pratica. In secondo luogo, le interviste semi-strutturate con le parti interessate approfondiscono gli impatti sulla sostenibilità sociale di queste pratiche. È stato ideato un quadro di valutazione binario per stabilire il collegamento tra pratiche culturali e fattori di sostenibilità sociale. Lo studio sostiene che mentre le pratiche culturali danno vita agli spazi pubblici, le appropriazioni temporanee degli spazi pubblici spesso interrompono i ritmi cittadini a causa della mancanza di integrazione con la pianificazione urbana. Riconoscere queste pratiche e integrarle nel processo di pianificazione generale può migliorare la sfera pubblica urbana e favorire la resilienza sociale.

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1. Introduction: Spatiality and Urban socio-religious culture

Culture and its associated practices, many of them with roots in the past, have displayed a symbiotic relationship with the urban public realm, where the urban plays diverse roles ranging from an onlooker to participant, to at times, the artist itself as cultural practices play out on its canvas. Indian cities such as Mumbai and Varanasi stand as a testament to this unique interaction of culture and urban public realm creating livable, sustaining environments in these cities. According to Inglis (2005), culture is understood as the ways of life of a particular group of individuals, their characteristic ways of doing things and recurring patterns that help them make sense of the world around them. Williams (1961) illustrated culture as a social construct with 3 interrelated levels, namely, lived culture of a particular time and place, recorded culture (from art to everyday acts), and culture of the selective tradition, often termed as High culture. This study foregrounds itself on the sphere of lived culture that includes aspects of culture accessible to those living at present a particular time and place and its multi-scalar interactions with the urban public realm.

Religious culture is a subset of culture at large, with meanings that are overlapping yet distinct from other subsets of culture such as economic, political or media culture (Edara, 2017). Religious practices including festivals that play out in the urban, become significant parts of urban lived culture. Burchardt (2018) has noted that belonging, space, materiality and visibility are the four paradigms that can be used to understand urban religion. Hervieu-Léger (2002) identified physical space, spiritual space and geopolitical space as points of interaction between religion and spatiality in the city. They underline spatiality as one of the ways by which urban religion comes to negotiate the city for itself using tools such as discursive, visual, acoustic, material and embodied spectacles that complete the enactment of religion. Waghorne (2004) further points out that the urban middle classes use religious sensibilities as a means of constructing spatial forms and creating a system of hierarchical organisations in the otherwise sanitised imaginations of the city. They further elucidate that such mediations are a sign of a global cosmopolitan imagination of religion rather than any historical or vernacular representation as is often misconstrued with religious practices. Meyer (2013) further draws our attention to the materialities associated with urban religious practices and their role in creating meaning through the overall sensory experiences. Materiality is also expressed through spatial markers, processional routes and sensorial experiences exemplified in the chanting, drumbeats, music and rhythms that announce the rituals

to the world.

Perry (2020) term festivals as Integrative sites- as sites of collision of the tangible and intangible with both positive and negative consequences. Robert Orsi's definition of the city as a sacred space (Orsi, 2012) begins to take on newer meanings when we look at the spatial-social imaginations of the city in the form of the processional rituals that lay claim to physical as well as spiritual space of the city. Festivals become dynamic spaces where the ideas of place and cultural expression combine to emphasize the plurality of meanings held within the festivals themselves. Del Barrio (2012) alludes to festivals as spatiotemporal composites of different realities, where the content becomes recognizable only within the given context. The festivals impact several realms of urban life such as the transformation of the public space and the generation of an urban fabric that resonates with vibrance for the duration of the festivals.

In the Indian scenario, such practices are the means through which urban identity manifests itself. Even as Indian urban cityscapes lack spatial clarity and crisp definitions owing to their layered origins and spatiotemporal characteristics, the spatiality of festivals and rituals give positive reinforcement to the conceptualization and materiality that comes to define distinctive spaces in the urban realm.

2. Urban cultural Practices- entanglements with social sustainability

Public spaces and festivals, when combined, hold significant potential for fostering social exchange and coexistence, as Pinochet-Cobos (2019) emphasizes. The concept of social sustainability has evolved from its initial focus on social justice and basic needs (WCED, 1987) to encompass long-term societal well-being, including factors like equity, social cohesion, and cultural vibrancy (Adams, 2006; Maller, 2006). Numerous studies highlight the role of cultural practices in strengthening social bonds and fostering a sense of shared identity. Scholars like Smith (2009) and Ramirez (2014) argue that shared traditions, festivals, and artistic expressions provide a platform for social interaction and community building. These activities nurture a sense of belonging and strengthen social capital – the networks of trust and reciprocity within a community (Putnam, 2001). Additionally, Bhabha (1994) suggests that cultural practices can celebrate diversity within a community, promoting intercultural understanding and fostering a more cohesive society.

Furthermore, cultural practices can contribute to social justice and equity (McCloud, 2011; Sarkar, 2001; Khalil, 2010). Hernandez (2018) emphasizes how cultural practices can empower marginalized groups by providing a platform for self-expression and challenging dominant narratives. This fosters a more inclusive society where diverse voices and perspectives are valued. Similarly, Mbembe (2016) argues that cultural exchange, facilitated by cultural practices, can broaden perspectives and challenge social biases, leading to a more equitable social fabric.

Cultural practices contribute significantly to community well-being in various ways. Davis (2018) suggests they foster a sense of purpose and belonging, contributing to

mental and emotional well-being. Harvey (2006) argues that cultural practices serve as a vehicle for social learning and the transmission of knowledge across generations. This strengthens social resilience (the ability of a community to bounce back from challenges) and fosters a sense of collective identity (Učka, 2019).

Social resilience can be bolstered by cultural practices in several ways. These practices promote a sense of shared identity and belonging, providing a strong social fabric for mutual support (Učka, 2019). Cultural traditions also transmit valuable knowledge across generations, offering practical solutions for overcoming hardship (Fik et al., 2010). Furthermore, cultural activities build social capital and trust, creating strong networks that facilitate collective action in recovery efforts (Adger, 2000). Rituals and narratives embedded in cultural practices can even help communities process trauma and maintain hope during difficult times (Ahearn, 2008). Finally, cultural practices provide opportunities for artistic expression and creativity, enriching the lives of individuals and contributing to a more vibrant and fulfilling community experience (Florida, 2002).

3. Aim, Objectives and Methods

The study aims to explore how urban socio-religious practices (such as festivals and ritual traditions) transform the urban public realm and create values that align with the broader goals of social sustainability. The study limits itself to four socio-religious practices of the subaltern communities in the city of Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, that play out in the urban public realm, creating avenues of public interaction and exchanges. The study is divided into 2 parts where the initial part focuses on locating, defining and describing the loci of the socio-religious practices tied to the urban realm at varying scales. An extensive review of literature on native socio-religious traditions was employed to select 4 socio-religious practices namely -Ashwath Katte, Ooru Habba, Thimithi and Karaga Festivals along with their designated urban sites as cases to undertake the study. The 4 cases differ in their spatial, temporal and communal characteristics. A combination of methods such as physical surveys and field notes were used to understand the public settings created by the selected cases. Here, the term "public settings" is used to denote the physical aspects, materiality, and other spatial ways by which activities and people occupy and claim public spaces.

As the study progressed, it became clear that the urban is not just a density of population and built forms, but also of values, representations and ideologies (Qian,2014) enmeshed with the social, environmental and economic systems of the city. The growing understanding of culture as a value-binding way of life, holding both tangible-intangible capital as well as avenues of creative expression has seen a clamour for installing culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability. Socio-religious practices, that form a distinct part of culture, are sites where place meaning, and cultural expression combine to create a dynamic relationship between content and context (Perry,2020). Case-based studies on festivals as sites for sustainable development (Perry, 2020, Webster,2015) have revea-

led that festivals integrate across the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, accentuating the entangled nature of these aspects.

The second part of the study aims to build on the above argument and analyze how transformed public settings create values that lie entangled with ideals of sustainability. Entanglements are mostly positive notions, and ideas that illuminate the enmeshed nature of human, physical, natural, and cultural paradigms in the urban context. The study limits itself to an analysis of social sustainability parameters. Social resilience and related aspects were kept out of the scope of this study.

Investigating cultural practices including festivals necessitates research methods that capture their intricate nature. Ethnography, a qualitative approach, emerges as a powerful tool for this purpose (Holloway et al., 2010; Cudny, 2016). Unlike positivist methods that rely heavily on statistics, ethnography prioritizes understanding the "how" and "why" behind people's experiences at festivals (Stadler et al., 2013; Jepson & Clarke, 2016). Methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, allow for immersion in the socio-cultural environment, gleaning insights beyond surface-level data (Jepson & Clarke, 2016).

According to Jaimangal-Jones (2014) Participant observation allows researchers to directly observe behaviour, interactions, and the environment itself fostering a nuanced understanding of participants' motivations and the cultural norms that shape their actions. This "dual role" as participant and observer allows for a rich tapestry of data and meticulous field notes serve as a crucial record of these observations, forming the foundation for later analysis. Jaeger & Mykletun (2013) highlight that the qualitative approach, particularly through case studies, is particularly well-suited for studying contemporary festivals within real-life contexts as they present a dynamic and unpredictable setting where the researcher has limited control This approach fosters a rich understanding of the lived experiences of those involved in festivals, from organizers and staff to attendees and local residents.The fieldwork entailed participant observation of social interactions that unfolded as the cultural practice played out in the public realm along with interviews and informal conversations with practitioners and participants. The first phase, spanning the initial six months of the study, involved pilot interviews. These informal conversations were conducted with community members knowledgeable about the selected socio-religious practices. These unstructured discussions served two key purposes:

(i) Gaining Background Information: The pilot interviews provided a general overview of the historical context and the community connections associated with each of the four case studies (Ashwath Kattes, Ooru Habbas, Thimithi, and Karaga festivals). This information facilitated the identification of physical sites and the annual calendar of events relevant for conducting physical surveys later in the research process.

(ii) Identifying Stakeholders: More importantly, these pilot interviews helped identify key actors and stakeholder groups involved in each practice. This included individuals holding positions of authority, such as chief priests and organizing committee members.

The second phase of data collection, conducted over the following 18 months, utilized semi-structured interviews. A total of 12 interviews (3 per case study) were carried out across the four chosen practices. The interview participants comprised a mix of stakeholders and community members. Four interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including priests, festival organizers, and vendors who occupy the Ashwath Kattes. The remaining eight interviews included participants with varying levels of engagement in the practices, ranging from active involvement to more passive participation. The semi-structured interviews covered a range of topics. Initially, the interviews focused on gathering factual information, such as details on historical/religious significance, specific ritual practices, and the identification of actors and stakeholders involved. Subsequently, the interviews transitioned to open-ended questions delving deeper into aspects of social sustainability (details to be elaborated upon in Section 5.2).

In addition to the interviews, discrete participant observations were conducted for all four cases. This method allowed the researcher to record and analyse intangible aspects related to social sustainability, such as social mobility, opportunities for intercultural interactions, and potential avenues for creative expression within these practices. To enrich the primary data collected through interviews and observations, the research also incorporated an extensive review of available secondary literature pertaining to the four chosen socio-religious practices.

4. Urban cultural Practices in the city: Spatial loci and public settings

Bengaluru is a metropolitan city located in the southern state of Karnataka in India that is home to all three levels of culture stated above. The city has a population of over ten million with a decadal growth rate of 47.18 % (Census 2011) making it one of the fastest-growing cities in the country. The city has witnessed rampant densification of inner-city neighbourhoods resulting in decreased per capita public space. Today, the erstwhile garden city can afford a mere 2 sq. m of open space per capita to its citizens despite World Health Organisation (WHO) and the India-specific Urban and Regional Development Plans Formulation and Implementation (URDPFI) guidelines mandating 9-12 sq. m of open space per person for liveable environments. The demand for public space is palpable as seen in the frenzy accompanying the opening of the city's new-age public spaces such as malls, retail spaces and restaurants that are often exclusionary and cater to selected social groups in the city. Socio-religious practices remain one of the primary ways through which the average urban citizen connects with the urban public realm.

The importance of public spaces extends beyond a single, monolithic category. Understanding public spaces at various scales is crucial for creating truly inclusive and functional urban environments. Early works by scholars like Lynch (1960) established the importance of scale in understanding urban environments. Several studies have proposed frameworks for analysing public spaces at various scales. Harvey (2008) emphasizes the need for nested hierarchies of public spaces, for a more just and equitable

Scale	Cultural practice	Brief description
Street scale	Ashwath Katte	Built platform around sacred trees, acting as nodes of social, religious and economic activities
Neighbourhood scale	Ooru Habba	Annual event in the form of a festive procession venerating village deities
City scale- uninodal	Thimithi	Annual fire walking festival where devotees congregate at a specific site in the city
City scale- multinodal	Karaga	Annual festival that links multiple sacred sites including temples, tanks and water bodies through a processional route.

urban fabric while Dias (2012) examined how different cultural groups interact and negotiate their identities within public spaces. Socio-religious practices such as rituals traditions and festivals manifest in the urban public realm at multiple scales in the city of Bengaluru. The study uses the urban planning framework to delineate scales. Street, neighbourhood and city scales were used to select and categorize the socio-religious practices for the study. Uni/ multi nodality was an added layer at the city scale to maintain a distinction between cases that occupied a singular site in the city versus those that occupied multiple sites across the city.

Tab. 1 – Multiscalar cultural practices in Bengaluru city, Source- Author

 (i) *Street scale: Ashwath Katte-* Traditional houses in the region had a unique threshold demarcating the private from the public termed the Jagali Katte loosely translated into the entrance platform. The katte took the form of a semi-open space on a raised plinth, with walls on three sides. The street-facing site was left open to create a welcoming space that allowed for easy interaction with outsiders without disturbing the privacy of the house. An effective climate-mediating transition space, the Jagali Katte was an intrinsic part of the sociocultural life and used as a site for daily chores, kids play, chance meetings and social interaction. The Jagali Katte as a cultural practice no longer exists within modern residential typologies, except in a few places in the city. However, its derivative – the Ashwath Katte (Peepul tree platforms) continues to hold a place of significance in the rural-urban morphology of Bengaluru.

  The Aswath katte occurs as a raised platform built around the sacred peepul tree. The platform is usually high enough to act as a seating space and becomes a space for gathering, ritual activities and interaction at the street level. The Ashwath Kattes vary in shape, size and adornment based on their location and primary usage. Those within temple boundaries serve primarily religious functions. In contrast, others double up as community interaction cum vending spaces. There are innumerable Ashwath Kattes spread across Bengaluru city. For this study, we studied Kattes on the Hennur main road and the junction of Thanisandra and Rachenahalli main roads.

Fig. 1 – Ashwath Kattes at Hennur Main road and Thanisandra-Rachenahalli road Junction; Source-Author

(ii) Neighbourhood Scale: Ooru Habba-Bengaluru's cultural landscape is home to several sacral processions spread across diverse religious and socio-cultural practices. Srinivas(2004) has documented the existence of 4 guardian deities located at the cardinal boundaries of the city. While Annamma guards the north, the South has Patalamma, the east has Muthyalamma and the west relies on Gadagamma, each associated with 15 to 25 villages and tanks/ lakes in their vicinity. Every year, in the months of May-June the Goddesses step out from their temples and visit their devotees' homes during the colorful chariot festivals. Rural-urban entanglements lay bare as the urban metropolis of Bengaluru breaks up into over 100 quasi-rural villages, each of which celebrates its own village festivals called Ooru Habbas (village festivals), commemorating its guardian deities. The Ooru Habbas are linked to smaller village temples with their chariot processions that congregate to a central point marking their stake and territories in the urban public imagination. These chariot festivals are instances of heightened use of the public realm where spaces of public use including streets, markets, tanks and smaller shrines come alive transcending ownership and control parameters. For the study, we

Fig. 2 – Ooru Habba at Cox Town, Bengaluru. Image Credits: Divya Hemantharaj

looked at the Cox town Habba which is held around the Gangamma Temple at the junction of Doddigunta and Kadirappa roads.

(iii) City Scale (Uni nodal): Thimithi festival- The Drowpathy Amman fire walking (Thimithi) festival held in Bengaluru, Karnataka is a legacy of the Tamil migrants who moved to the city in the 18th-19th century after the formation of the British cantonment in the city. The festival is organized as a 41-day event usually in the months of May-June. Seen mainly as a non-Brahmanical festival, the festival sees participation from the marginalized communities and castes including members of the transgender community, locally termed as Aravanis. The act of fire walking is itself a symbolic rendition of Drowpathy's rebirth as she is known to have been fire-born to uphold *Dharma* (truth and righteousness). The ritual becomes a metaphor for the purification and rebirth of the devotee as they pledge themselves to the Devi in the hope of getting relief from disease and pain. The Thimithi festival takes place in the regions near Ulsoor, which occupies a central and prime location in the city structure. The devotees move in a procession around 4 public streets around the Ulsoor area in Bengaluru. The Thimithi practitioners are revered by the public who pour water over them throughout the procession. The procession finally moves towards the RBANMS ground where a fire bed termed *Thee Kuzhi* (firebed) is set up for the firewalking ritual.

(iv) City Scale (Multi nodal): Karaga Festival- The Karaga is one of the better-known local festivals in Bengaluru. This is an example of a community-led festival where the Vahnikula Kshatriya or Tigala community, who emigrated to Bengaluru from Tamil Nadu, lay claims to their adoptive city through the colourful festival. The festival leaves timestamps across many sacred sites across the Pete (fort) area of the city as processions of varying scales crisscross the city during its eleven-day period. In the Karaga festival, from Day 2 to 8 the priests visit temples and water bodies in 9 directions across the city for ritual bath. The festival culminates in the Karaga procession that cuts through the city where the priest, dressed up as the Goddess, metaphorically becomes one with the Goddess. People perceive the Karaga Bearing priest as the Goddess walking the streets and blessing their houses as the procession moves around the neighbourhood streets around the Dharmaraya Swamy temple. Rituals act as material expressions of territoriality replete with spatial markers, processional routes and sensorial experiences exemplified in the chanting, drumbeats, music and rhythms that announce the rituals to the world. The festival also keeps alive certain otherwise defunct architectural typologies such as the ancient garadi mane (exercise rooms) which are strangely reminiscent of the flashy gymnasiums and health clubs that attract the youngsters of the city today.

4.1 Transformations in Public Settings

Literature suggests that festivals can blur the lines between public and private space. Oldham (2008) explores how festivals can transform public spaces into temporary "festivalscapes," distinct from everyday experiences. This temporary appropriation allows for a more playful and expressive use of space. Additionally, the temporary nature of

*Fig. 3 – Fire walking (Theemithi)
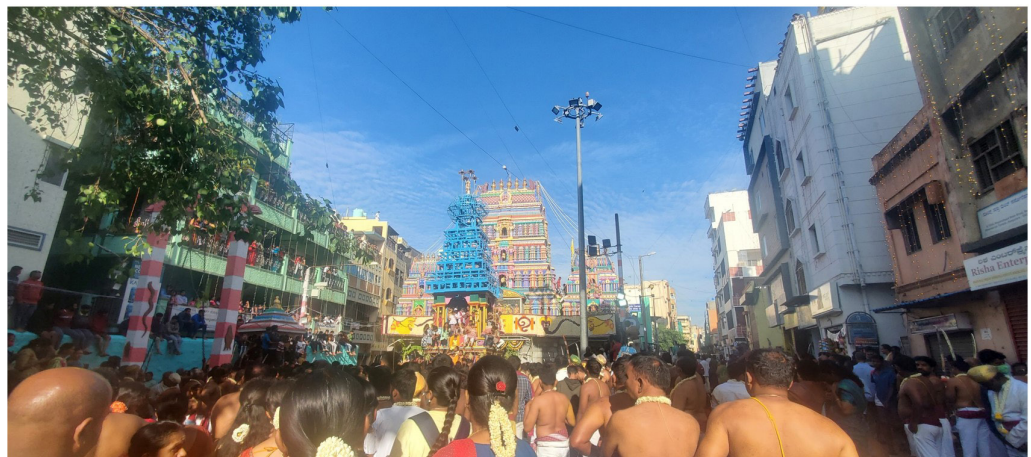festival at RBANM's Grounds, Ulsoor*

*Fig. 4 – Karaga Festival held in the
Pete area, Bengaluru; Clockwise Top
to bottom- (a) Jalakanteshvara temple,
Gavipuram (b) Dharmaraya Swamy
Temple (c) Hasi Karaga Procession;
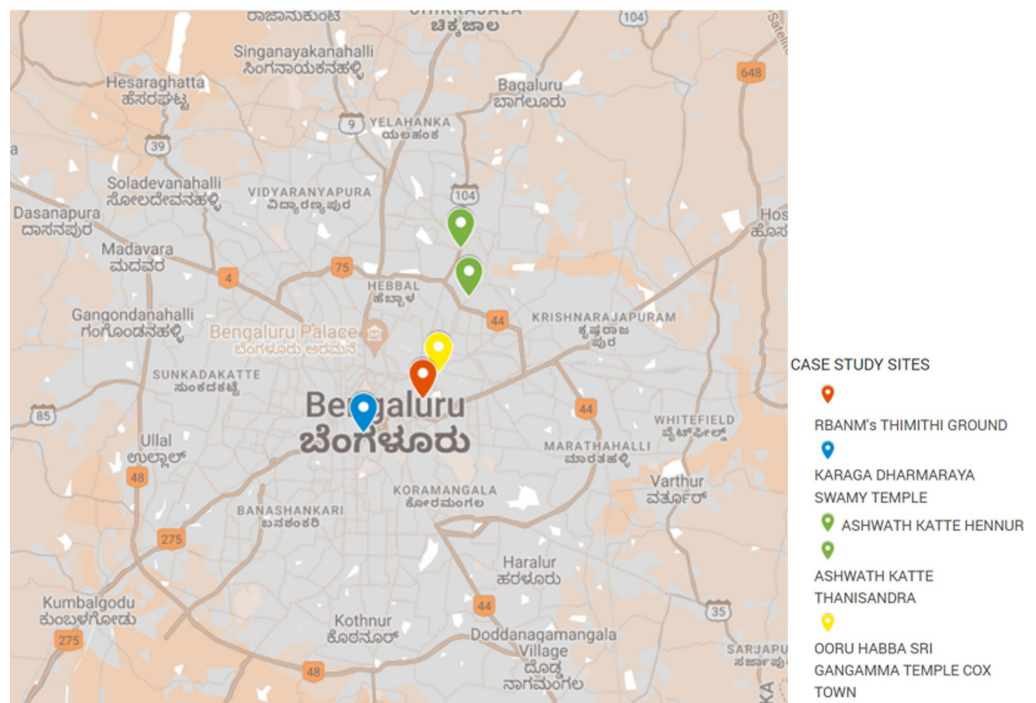Image Credits: Roshini M, Divya H.*

festivals can create a sense of inclusivity, as the space becomes accessible to a wider range of people for a specific period (Jeyarathnam, 2016). Literature highlights festivals' ability to breathe life into underutilized public spaces. Whyte (1980) emphasizes how festivals can activate dormant spaces, encouraging engagement and a sense of ownership. Similarly, Heran (2018) argues that festivals showcase the potential of public spaces for recreation, performance, and community gatherings. This transformation can even lead to permanent improvements, prompting city planners to redesign these spaces for greater public use and greater interest and engagement from the citizens for the upkeep of the public spaces (Evans, 2002). Despite their positive impacts, festivals also present challenges. Setting up and dismantling festival infrastructure can disrupt regular users of public spaces, causing temporary displacement (Oldham, 2008). Noise, congestion, and large crowds can negatively impact residents and nearby businesses (Getz, 2005). Furthermore, large crowds can lead to environmental damage to parks and infrastructure, requiring significant resources for cleanup (Goldblatt, 2002).

4.2 Cultural Practices: Sites and Implications for urban planning

The Ashwath Katte and Ooru Habba sites are spread across the city numbering hundreds of nodes that get activated at specific times during the year. Kattes are usually located near religious sites and temples but are also found alongside main city streets. As the city expanded, rural areas were organically integrated into the city structure. The Kattes are reminders of the once rural morphology, now deeply enmeshed into the urban structure

The Ooru Habbas are usually held around the neighbourhood temples and their surrounding streets where the deity is taken out in a procession that crisscrosses the neighbourhoods. Temples and their associated practices are well known to be organizing elements in the planning of rural villages in India. The Kattes and Ashwath Kattes become an extension of the same with processions and public activities added as temporal elements that impact spatial planning and neighbourhood organization. During festival time, the entire neighbourhood including its key streets, and public spaces, such as parks, clearings etc. become a unified celebration ground. This module is repeated over and over again as urban villages spring to life during their own Ooru Habbas.

Fig. 5 – Location of Case study sites in Bengaluru city

CASE STUDY SITES

RBANM's THIMITHI GROUND

KARAGA DHARMARAYA SWAMY TEMPLE

ASHWATH KATTE HENNUR

ASHWATH KATTE THANISANDRA

OORU HABBA SRI GANGAMMA TEMPLE COX TOWN

The Ulsoor Thimithi has a well-defined site and processional route as does the Karaga festival though it differs from the Thimithi owing to being spread over multiple days and multiple sites across the city.

Permission of the city government and the Police is sought before organizing the Karaga and Thimithi festivals owing to the mass congregation, crown management issues and appropriation of public roads/spaces for the processions. However, there is little evidence of any urban planning policies or considerations built around these practices.

During the course of the study, we examined key planning documents for Bengaluru, including the Bangalore Masterplan (BMP) 2015, Bangalore Metropolitan Region Revised Structure Plan (BMRSP) 2031, Revised Master Plan (RMP) for Bengaluru - 2031 (Volumes 1 & 3), Comprehensive Mobility Plan draft (2019), and BBMP Budget Estimates (2023-24 & 2024-25), to assess their approach to safeguarding, managing, and promoting the city's cultural practices. The BMP 2015 acknowledges historical heritage, arts, culture, and heritage tourism as guiding principles for city planning. However, it overlooks the significance of intangible cultural practices, such as festivals and everyday heritage sites like the Ashwath Katte. The BMRSP 2031 recognizes the importance of heritage and cultural sites, including major religious places. It proposes a 500-meter recreational and tourism zone around such sites. While this promotes accessibility, it excludes village temples (*gramasthanas*) and living heritage sites. Additionally, the allowance for temporary constructions during festivals prioritizes commercial aspects over the cultural essence of these events.

The RMP 2031 represents a significant shift. It identifies "Heritage and Cultural Conservation" as a core principle and takes a commendable step by recognizing nine sites, including the Karaga festival, as cultural and intangible heritage. It also acknowledges the need to plan for fairs and festivals at various scales. Furthermore, it highlights the need for delineating heritage zones and creating a dedicated heritage masterplan. However, it's important to note that the provisional RMP 2031 was withdrawn by the state government in 2022. A review of the municipal budget for the city revealed that an amount of INR 150 Lakhs (USD 180000) was earmarked for the celebration of the Karaga Festival. A detailed account of the expense categories was not available. Other cultural practices covered in the study were not mentioned in the planning documents and municipal budget accounts. At present, the city government approaches these practices/ events as law, order and traffic issues as evidenced by the advisory issued by the Bangalore traffic police specifying traffic diversions, parking sites and restrictions on the eve of the Karaga and Thimithi festivals.

4.3 Ownership, control and Spatial Extent

In the case of Ashwath Katte and Ooru Habba, the designated spaces such as the Katte, village, temple, etc. are publicly owned and are maintained/ controlled by community groups. On the other hand, festivals such as the Thimithi and Karaga, the sacred sites such as temples, tanks, etc. are owned and controlled by private individuals or closed
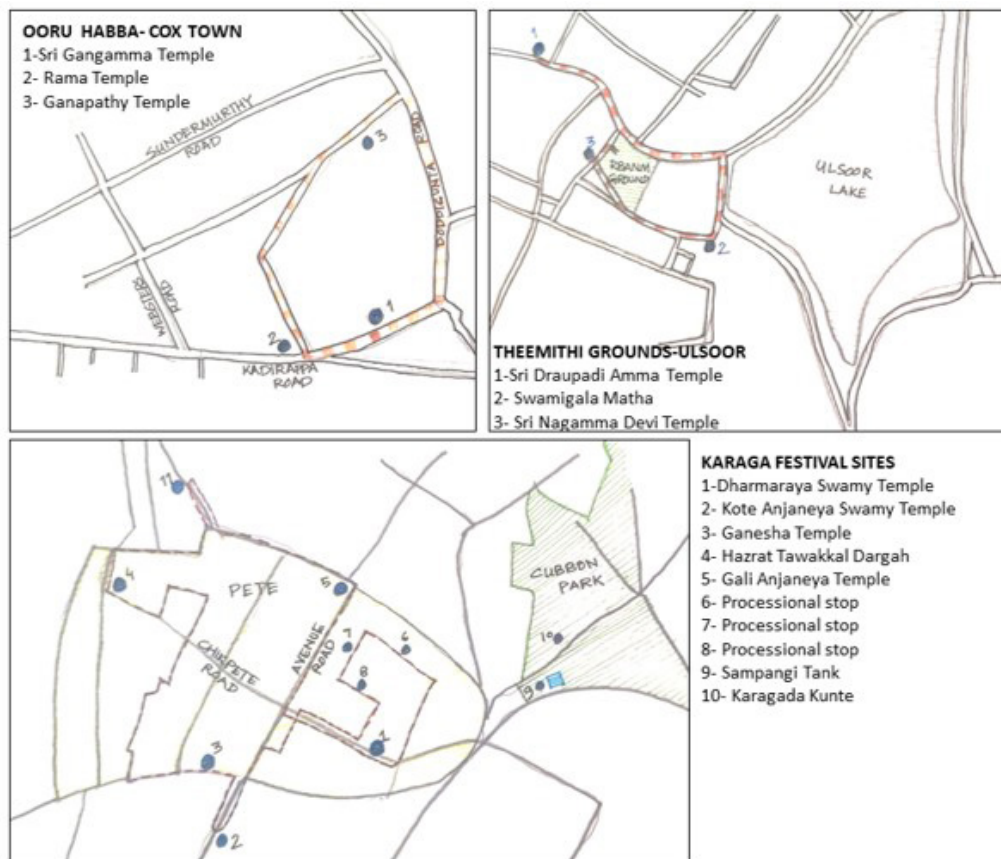
Fig. 6 – Processional routes linked with Festivals; Clockwise top to Bottom- (a) Ooru Habba at Cox Town (b) Thimithi at RBANM's Ground (c) Karaga Sites around Dharmaraya Swamy Temple; Source- Author

community groups while the processions occupy the publicly owned streets and vacant public spaces under public governance and control. The Ooru Habbas, Thimithi and Karaga festivals are examples of temporary appropriation of urban public space through their ritual-linked processions. Despite public ownership, streets are highly regulated and controlled spaces as far as public use is concerned. Barring vehicular and pedestrian movement, other public activities are usually discouraged on streets citing reasons of law, order and ease of traffic movement. The festival processions transform streets into active public zones where the nature and intensity of activities are no longer restricted. Secondly, as illustrated by Quinn (2021), festivals often stretch the "opening hours" of these highly regulated public spaces, create meeting places and spaces for people watching, and generate an array of activities. The Karaga procession starts after midnight and continues till the early hours of the morning. The unique temporality associated with the rituals engages the public realm beyond its usual active hours.

Lastly, several vacant/ leftover/non-public spaces in the city such as street clearings, vacant private lots, and institutional grounds are often brought into the public domain during these festivals. The Ooru Habbas are unique in this respect as the villagers usually throw open their homes to outsiders during the festival, drastically extending the public realm into their private domains. The Ashwath Katte's spatial extent is usually limited to the platform encircling the sacred tree. However, we observe temporal variations

Fig. 7 – Ashwath Katte sites- a) Hennur Main road   b) Junction of Thanisandra and Rachenahalli main roads
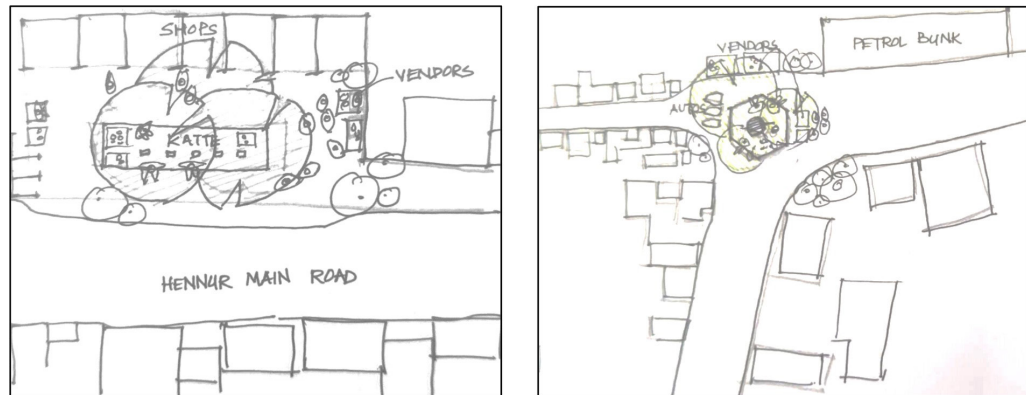
in the extent and influence of its public zone of influence. In several cases, we observed the katte transforming into vending zones replete with small businesses that set up shop on the raised platform, attracting a large number of people during the evening hours. In a few cases, the zones of influence extended to the adjoining streets as well.

5. Cultural Practices: Linkages with social sustainability

The next part of the paper analyzes how the transformed public settings contribute to social sustainability. This analysis utilizes a two-pronged approach. First, participant observation helps establish the heterogeneity of actors and activities associated with each practice. Second, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders delve deeper into the social sustainability impacts of these practices. A binary assessment framework is devised to establish the link between cultural practices and social sustainability factors.

5.1 Heterogeneity of actors and activities

The socio-religious practices often involve a multitude of actors belonging to the extended community. Ritual-led practices such as the Ooru Habba, Thimithi and Karaga have a strong category of performers who lead the spectacle-generating set of activities, creating ample sensory stimulus that engages audiences from within and beyond the community. A secondary category of actors includes those who participate in the rituals in a supporting capacity but may not be the primary actors/ performers. These participants are almost always drawn from a specific community/ village/ region reinforcing a certain sense of belonging and territoriality. The location of these actors in the urban performative canvas follows strict hierarchical rules based on ritual sanctity and community linkages often displaying a sense of agency drawn from the strength of community organizations.

In case of the Karaga festival, the two main sets of performers include the priest who carries the Karaga and the group of Veerakumaras, who flank the Karaga-carrying priest while displaying a show of military power, drawn from the legend of Drowpathy's army. Men hailing from five families — Gowdru, Ganachari, Gante Poojari, Potharaja Poojari and Archakas in the Thigala community are eligible to become Ve-

erakumaras while only those hailing from the Archaka family are eligible to carry the Karaga. Participants reported that they were ordained into the role of Veerakumaras at the age of eighteen after rigorous scrutiny of their physical strength, behavior and nature. While social interaction and community building sanctioned by ritual practice remain the common threads that define the set of activities that transpire in each example, we also see glimpses of economic, recreational, familial and identity-reinforcing activities manifesting in the urban public realm.

5.2 Assessing social sustainability impacts

The inherently complex and subjective nature of social sustainability presents a significant challenge in developing effective measurement frameworks to assess social sustainability. Critics argue that relying solely on quantitative indicators can overlook the qualitative aspects of social well-being (Evans, 2012). An assessment of the social sustainability impacts of each socio-cultural practice was undertaken to unravel the entanglements between culture and urban sustainability. A framework of 21 sub-indicators was delineated after an extensive survey of literature on indicators of social sustainability in socio-religious and festival settingsFurther analysis identified a four-fold thematic structure within the 21 sub-indicators, enabling their categorization under distinct yet interrelated dimensions of social sustainability: equity and inclusion, social cohesion, human rights and well-being, and community engagement and empowerment. These categories encompass a mix of observational and survey-based measurement approaches. While the specific nomenclature and categorization reflect the author's interpretation, it aligns with well-established frameworks within social sustainability literature. A concise overview of these four categories is provided below.

(i) The **equity and inclusion** group of indicators assess fair and equal access for all to the cultural site. It includes the assessment of the representation of diverse groups on the site, and their ability to challenge traditional biases. It goes beyond access by addressing social equity, dismantling barriers, and promoting social mobility through cultural experiences. Platforms for self-expression like open forums and co-creation initiatives empower communities to share their stories. (Adams, 2006, Bhabha, 1994, Hernandez, 2018, Khalil, 2010, Maller, 2006, Mbembe, 2016, McCloud, 2011, Sarkar, 2001, Jeyarathnam, 2016)

(ii) The **Social cohesion** group of indicators reflect the quality and strength of social bonds within a community. Encompassing social capital, a sense of purpose and belonging, strong social bonds, and a shared identity, it measures social interaction, intercultural understanding, and social learning generated by cultural practices. (Adams, 2006, Maller, 2006, Smith 2009, Ramirez, 2014, Putnam, 2001, Bhabha, 1994, Davis, 2018, Harvey, 2006, Učka, 2019, Adger, 2000)

(iii) The **Human rights and well-being**, group of indicators, emphasize the re-

spect and promotion of these values within cultural practices and sites. This translates to ensuring gender equality and celebrating cultural diversity, fostering mental and emotional well-being through positive cultural experiences, and facilitating the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, these indicators assess the extent to which cultural spaces encourage artistic expression and creativity, empowering individuals and communities to flourish. (Davis, 2018, Harvey,2006, Fik et al., 2010, Florida, 2002, Oldham, M., 2008).

(iv) The **community engagement and empowerment**, group of indicators of social sustainability in cultural practices and sites, assess the level of collaboration and ownership felt by the community. This includes the strength of community organizations in decision-making processes, opportunities for volunteerism and participation, and a fostered sense of agency where community members feel empowered to contribute their voices and perspectives.(Smith, 2009, Ramirez, 2014, Učka, 2019, Heran 2018)The study employed two primary methods to capture data on the social sustainability indicators for the cases. A Semi-structured interview guide comprising of 19 open-ended questions that address the social sustainability parameters was devised to guide the interview process. Direct Interview Prompts were employed for collecting respondents' perception-based and self-reported data on specific social constructs (S2) like social capital, sense of belonging, gender equality etc. For more nuanced or implicit social sustainability parameters(S1) such as social mobility, social learning, or challenging social biases etc, we analysed the overall tonality of the interview for subtle cues that suggested broader social sustainability impacts. While potentially revealing deeper social effects, this approach remains limited by its subjectivity and reliance on the researcher's interpretation. The interview data was supplemented with discrete participant observation of the cases revealing unprompted interactions, social dynamics, and engagement patterns. This provided a richer understanding of the lived experience generated by the selected cases.

We developed a binary assessment framework to summarize the interview responses and observations. This framework categorized the presence or absence of social sustainability parameters within the selected cases. The assessment refrains from commenting on the intensity or level of activation for each parameter in the selected cases.

(i) Equity & Inclusion: Both the Thimithi and the Karaga festivals are associated with spectacular processions, replete with sensory markers that traverse the city, announcing the existence of the parent community groups. The elaborate processional routes crisscross several important nodes in the city bringing the community into those parts of the city which are otherwise out of reach for a large section of these largely subaltern, marginalized communities. The Thimithi ritual ceremony and its associated procession seek to momentarily territorialize the area around Ulsoor, which has become an upmarket, gentrified locality in the city. Ulsoor remains the

Indicators of social sustainability		Jagali Katte	Ashwath Katte	Ooru Habba	Thimithi Festival	Karaga Festival
Equity & Inclusion	Social mobility			■	■	
	Representation of diverse groups		■	■	■	■
	Social equity		■	■	■	
	Self-expression		■	■	■	
	Challenge social biases		■	■	■	■
Social Cohesion	Social capital	■	■			■
	Sense of purpose and belonging			■	■	■
	Social bonds	■	■			■
	Sense of shared identity			■	■	■
	Social interaction	■	■			■
	Intercultural understanding				■	
	Social learning	■		■	■	■
Human Rights and Well-being	Gender equality		■		■	
	Cultural diversity				■	
	Mental and emotional well-being				■	
	Transmission of knowledge across generations			■	■	■
	Artistic expression and creativity				■	■
Community Engagement and Empowerment	Volunteerism			■		■
	Strength of community organisations			■	■	■
	Sense of agency		■	■	■	■
	Community building			■	■	

Tab. 2 – Social sustainability assessment of selected cultural practices, Source- Author

bridge between the anglicized Bengaluru cantonment of British origin and the native Halasuru which was under the Mysore kingdom. Respondents reported that there is almost zero participation from the Cantonment side, barring a few curious onlookers and researchers. Field observations, of the spectacle generated by the processions leading towards the Ulsoor Thimithi ground, suggested the creation of a powerful memory that encapsulates the aspirations of the local communities as they negotiate for spatiality and power through the means of this festival. This was further corroborated through the interview responses where participants expressed a sense of pride in being able to occupy prime space in the city, overturning narratives of the spatial divide that often dominate the histories of migrant communities.

The Karaga procession may be understood as a stage where both the onlookers, as

well as the performers, are seamlessly bound into one large performance, becoming equal contributors to the resultant urban spectacle. The elaborate route of the Karaga procession over its eleven-day period sees the community stake claim over several temples, water tanks, wells and other important nodes in the city. Culture here becomes a tool that gives legitimacy and visibility to an immigrant social group that stakes its claims over the city's history.

(ii) Social Cohesion: New threads of research point out that the Ashwath katte represents spatial tools for social capital in the neighbourhood and consequently in the city. Keswani, K. (2017 & 2023) conducted spatial documentation of Ashwath kattes across Bengaluru and deduced that these socio-religious spaces also work well as ecological, social and inclusive spaces. Two of the three people interviewed for Ashwath Kattes during our study reported spending up to 1.5 to 2 hours daily at the katte, interacting with friends and family while also completing daily errands such as vegetable shopping at the katte. Similarly, Ooru Habbas have now become arenas of exchange, offering opportunities "to construct social ties and civic norms that bind loosely connected strangers (Barker, A. et al, 2019). As the city transforms into a metropolis, the villages have been gradually swallowed by new developments in the form of residential layouts and multi-lane highways. Economic considerations and gentrification have changed the social mix of the resident population. Old-time residents reported a constant dwindling of interest and engagement from the youngsters in the community in maintaining social ties. However, they also reported that the competitive spirit between neighbouring villages and support from local politicians energizes the youth of the village as they take charge of the Ooru Habba organization. Their responses echo our observation that such localized festivals are being celebrated with renewed vigour in the city in the post-pandemic times. This may be viewed as the community staking out territorial claims over a city that has diluted its cultural ethos and composition owing to economic transitions. Several young participants reported that they learn about their history, rituals, and cultural traditions through the festival, and feel proud about their heritage and identity. Memory and history, linked to identity and belonging come together to reinforce the idea of imagined communities (Fu, Y., P. Long, and R. Thomas. 2015)for a few days of the year.

(iii) Human Rights and Well-being: At the Ashwath Katte, a simple platform sheltered with a tree and bearing religious sanctity allows women of all age groups to step out into the public realm without threats to safety or being seen as loitering. Women respondents reported that they feel safe and free from judgement while visiting the katte. They reported stepping out of their homes under the pretext of religious purposes or daily errands but ended up spending more time interacting with their neighbours and social contacts at the katte. Several Kattes had women vendors who set up shop during the evening hours to capitalize on the economic potential of the milling crowds that converged at the katte. Respondents reported the ease of doing business facilitated by their familiarity with the community and a sense of safety brought forth by being always surrounded by people.

The gender aspect manifests again, albeit in a different context in both the Thimithi and the Karaga rituals. The primary ritual in both festivals requires the cisgender male priest/practitioner to dress up in female attire replete with feminine markers such as sarees, bangles, jewellery, and floral adornments. While the ritual is seen as a path towards invoking the female deity, the momentary gender shift points to the underlying reverence for the feminine in a hitherto patriarchal society.

The Ooru Habbas have become an opportunity for the village communities to display and outdo each other in creativity and artistic expression. Colorful flower-bedecked chariots compete for design, grandeur and spectacle generation. The Ooru Habba committees from the villages take it upon themselves to decorate the public spaces in their villages, usually including the temple grounds and streets leading towards the temple. This zeal transcending religious and caste lines often translates into a feeling of bonhomie and oneness creating a sense of wellbeing in the community.

(iv) Community Engagement & empowerment: The Ashwath Katte brings forth community engagement owing to its spatial, economic and liberating values as we have discussed in several sections above. The Thimithi, Karaga and Ooru Habba are community-led festivals where the community organizations comprising elders as decision-makers and the youth as volunteers come together to organize these festivals. A sense of empowerment is tied to the idea of territorialism as seen in laying claims over parts of the fast-globalizing city. Keswani, K. (2017) have documented the territorial production of urban space in Indian neighbourhoods through these Kattes. Sezer (2018) also suggests that the role of public space in shaping public life is key for the socio-cultural inclusion of immigrants, offering visibility for different groups, opportunities to interact and engage with others, and a chance to express cultural values and so assert citizenship. All 3 persons interviewed during the Karaga festival reported the exalted position that the Karaga festival holds in the socio-political power dynamics of the city. While certain communities ascribe their revered status to the festival, others reported that they owe their sustenance and sense of identity in the city structure to the festival.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

Bengaluru's lived culture is a tapestry of cultural practices drawn from the socio-religious ethos and traditional ways of life. These cultural practices constantly interact with the urban public realm including formal, informal and incidental public spaces, morphing them into zones of activity, interaction and social exchange. Barring a few, most are examples of temporary appropriation, where the public realm is often unprepared for the sudden burst of activity and engagement from the citizens. The resultant chaos, though regulated by community actors, often disrupts the normal rhythm of the city causing street blockages, traffic jams and other logistical issues. Even in the case of Ashwath Kattes, which are fixed and permanent spatial nodes, there is little or no acknowledgement of their presence as activity nodes in the city's

urban planning imagination.

There is a need to recognize these cultural patterns and integrate them into our urban planning processes. The benefits will be twofold. Firstly, urban planning tools can help seamlessly integrate the vibrance that these cultural practices bring to the public realm without causing stress on the urban infrastructural systems. Adding cultural planning as a layer to urban master planning is not new. However, in most cases, it is interpreted as heritage preservation and conservation in cognizance of the recorded culture of the past. Experiences in the city speak otherwise. Culture here is not just a reminder of the past, but an active part of the present-day urban fabric, pulsating with energy and human fervour that is necessary for a vibrant city. Indian cities can draw from examples of global cities where festivals and cultural events are supported by public policies. Public policy plays a significant role in supporting cultural festivals across Europe. Examples include project-based grants in France targeting festivals aligned with national cultural goals, Germany's "Kultursommer" initiative funding open-air summer events, and the Basque Country's program offering financial incentives for festivals promoting regional culture and language. Additionally, policies like the UK's "Festival Accessible Scheme" and Rotterdam's dedicated "Festivals" department demonstrate efforts to ensure festival accessibility and provide logistical support to organizers within a city. These diverse approaches highlight the multifaceted ways European governments contribute to a thriving cultural festival landscape.

Secondly, cognizance of the social sustainability generating values of these cultural values can help us recognize them as tools of social resilience. As culture negotiates the city, we find ourselves surrounded by entangled ideas that bring together concepts tied to environmental, social, economic, and sometimes even political sustainability. Cities in the global south are constantly braving threats related to climate change and economic downturns. While globalisation comes with its benefits, it also brings along uncertainties and stresses that plague connected economic systems. All 4 cases illustrated here promote social networks, resource sharing, and collective action while enforcing a culture of tolerance and acceptance. The study highlights the potential of cultural practices as tools for fostering social resilience within cities, particularly those facing challenges like climate change and economic instability. The emphasis lies in harnessing "local ethos" and established community coping mechanisms – a perspective urging a shift towards place-based approaches to urban sustainability planning.

Future research in this domain can delve deeper into the adaptive capacity of cultural practices within urban environments. Specifically, how do these practices evolve and transform to maintain their social resilience-building function amidst the complexities of city life? Exploring this question can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between culture and social sustainability in urban contexts.

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