Ahmedabad: The World Heritage Title and Challenges

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Abstract
On July 8, 2017, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared Ahmedabad as the World Heritage city, making it the first Indian city to bag that title. This paper deals with the city receiving the prestigious title and the challenges that tag along with it. It discusses various policies that can help preserve and restore the heritage houses and the obstacles faced while availing those policies. There are two sides to every coin and hence the "World Heritage" status comes along with its own list of pros and cons. The paper also briefly describes the contribution of Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) in task of preserving the heritage structures.

Keywords: Ahmedabad, challenges, heritage sites, policies, pros and cons.

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INTRODUCTION

Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat, is located on the banks of river Sabarmati. It is the economic and cultural center of Gujarat. It was founded on 26th January, 1411. The earliest settlement in Ahmedabad dates back to the 12th century under Chalukya dynasty rule. It was the ruled by the Sultans, Mughals, Marathas and the British. These rulers constructed a variety of structures – forts, temples, mosques, step wells, gates and many more that have become the identity of our city. Pols, the typical urban centers of old Ahmedabad were established in the 18th century. All these beautiful structures have helped inscribe our city's name in the World Heritage list, thus bestowing us with the precious title. The paper aims at studying the impacts of the title – increased tourism, traffic woes, implementation of new policies, increased pollution and steps taken by the government for conservation of these structures.

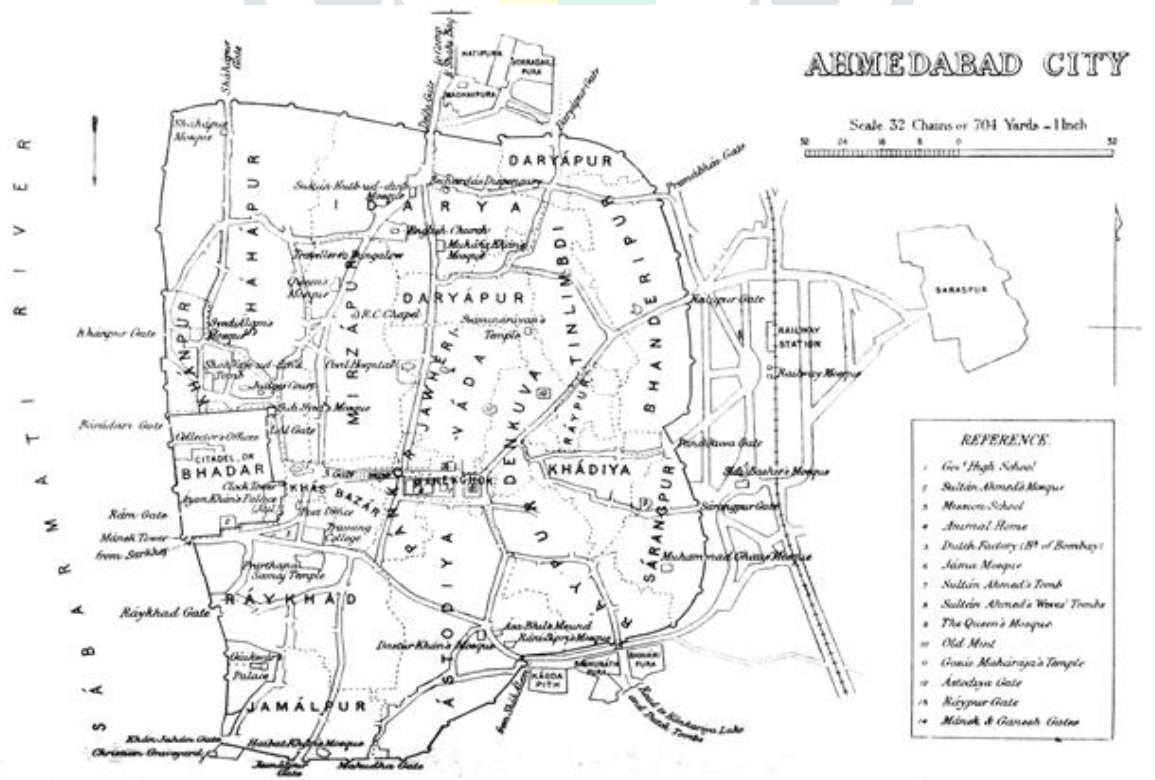## HISTORY OF THE WALLED CITY

Fig. 1: Ahmedabad Walled City Plan

The 600 years old city of Ahmedabad, located in western Indian state of Gujarat, was established by Ahmed Shah on the ancient sites of Ashaval and Karnavati. The city boasts of a composite culture and a rich blend of Hindu, European and Islamic architecture, on the account of the four power regimes – the Sultanate of Gujarat, the Mughal dominion, the Marathas and the British that ruled over Ahmedabad. In the 15th century, the city was encircled by a massive brick fortification of 10 km, comprising of 12 gates, 9 corners, 139 towers and 6000 battlements.

Today, the Greater Ahmedabad Urban Agglomeration (AUA) is spread over an area of 4200 sq.km. out of which 466 sq.km. is under the jurisdiction of Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) comprising the old walled city and the area outside it. The walled city covers 5.43 sq.km. area, with a large concentration of commercial activities in compliance with the traditional neighbourhood and narrow lanes, that give the city a unique identity. It houses Teen Darwaza, Lal Darwaza, Hutheesing temple, Swaminarayan temple, Bhadra Fort and many such architecturally attractive monuments. The architecture is not only limited to palaces, forts and temples, but consists of the residential precinct called "Pols". There are nearly 600 pols in Ahmedabad. These densely packed clusters of houses have colorful names and reflect the rich Gujarati culture.

HERITAGE CITY OF AHMEDABAD

Ahmedabad was declared as the World Heritage city by UNESCO on July 8, 2017. With that, Ahmedabad has joined the league of 287 World Heritage cities along the likes of Paris, Vienna, Cairo, Rome, Brussels and Edinburgh, to name a few. The World Heritage Centre (WHC) of UNESCO has stated that "The walled city of Ahmedabad on the eastern banks of Sabarmati river presents a rich architectural heritage from the sultanate period, notably the Bhadra citadel, the walls and gates of the Fort city and numerous mosques and tombs, as well as important Hindu and Jain temples of later periods".

The monuments recognized by UNESCO as the world heritage sites are categorized as:
- Religious– Hutheesing Jain Temple, Bhadrakali Temple, Sarkhej Roza, Sidi Saiyad Mosque, Jagannath Temple etc.
- Residential- Muhurat Pol, Kavi Dalpatram Chowk, Khara Kuva ni Pol, Desai ni Pol, etc.
- Step wells – Adalaj Vav, Jethabhai's Step wells, Dada Harir's Step well, etc.
- Gates – Teen Darvaza, Delhi Gate, Dariyapur Gate, Astodia Gate, Kalupur Gate, etc.
- Haveli – French Haveli, Mangaldas ni Haveli, Diwanji ni Haveli, Gaekwad Haveli, etc.
- Institutional – Dutch tomb, Jhulta Minara, Old Ahmedabad Stock Exchange, Calico Dome, St. Xaviers School, Gheekanta Court, etc.

In order to experience the glory of Ahmedabad, it is mandatory to walk through the walled city and to observe its rich and varied architecture, its religious places, art, culture and traditions. As a result, 'The Heritage Walk' was launched by Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) to enable the tourists and citizens to unveil this aspect of the city. The walk starts at Swaminarayan Temple, Kalupur, with 20 pause points, covering a length of 2 km, lasting for over two and half hours.

Fig. 2: National Heritage Sites – Jhulta Minara, Sidi Saiyad Jali, Choti Jami Masjid
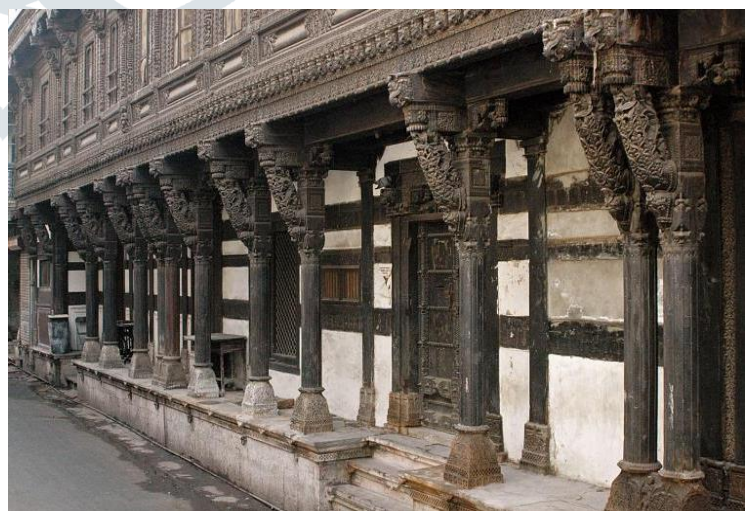
Fig. 3: A Typical Pol House

Fig. 4: Sarkhej Roza

Fig. 5: Adalaj Step-Well

POLICIES – IMPLEMENTATION AND ROADBLOCKS

Several "policy milestones" have been established by the heritage movement of Ahmedabad. It started with Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) developing a fully dedicated "Heritage Cell" in 1996. The first heritage walk was launched in November 1997. Eventually, it employed by-laws in the General Development Control Regulations (GDCR), which prohibits the listed heritage property from being pulled down without permission. The Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) formulated a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) policy, in 2013, according to which, the owners of 1100 odd heritage properties could sell, transfer or lease out additional Floor Space Index (FSI) to the developers. The TDR policy was incorporated to bring in more investments for conservation of heritage structures. 'Home-stay' policy has been unveiled for the national and global tourists, wherein, they check in at homes of the locals. The policy allows the hose owners to fix rents for their rooms, whereas, the tourists get a chance to experience the culture and traditions. Investments for conservation and restoration of heritage properties can be roped in via Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It is also possible to acquire subsidized loans from Housing and Urban Development Corporation Ltd. (HUDCO).

According to AMC, almost 70% of the 2236 heritage properties are still in use whereas only 12 have been restored and 5 are operating as homestays. The restoration of heritage faces many obstacles including the social issue of multiple owners, on the account of which, third parties are not able to purchase heritage properties. At the same time, due to the lack of political will required to bring investments in heritage conservation, the investors tend to stay away from it. There are many tenants who are unaware of their house being enlisted as heritage property. Also, many buildings lie in a derelict state as the owners and tenants, being ignorant of the TDR policy, are not able to restore their houses due to lack of funds. In order to avail the policies the tenants / owners have to undergo long procedure which is time consuming and full of hassles, and as a result they are not able to utilize the opportunity.

CHALLENGES

Traffic Woes

Ahmedabad is one of India's most polluted cities resulting in deterioration of its fragile cultural icons. Traffic chokes the narrow lanes of the walled city. The cramped heritage district was never made for vehicles, but today thousands of them including two-wheelers, auto-rickshaws, cars as well as buses, traverse the narrow streets and alleys every day, causing excessive congestion. The continuous honking causes noise pollution, whereas, the vehicle exhausts consisting of a lot of harmful gases, results in air pollution. The grinding congestion pollutes the surrounding air with fumes, streaking the stone-carved monuments with black stains. Thus, some initiative can be undertaken to manage and consequently reduce the traffic within the walled city, which otherwise may lead to a further decline in the condition of the heritage monuments, leaving the city vulnerable to the risk of the 'heritage' title being revoked.

Can Conservation and Development Go Hand-In-Hand?

As Ahmedabad celebrates its heritage tag, it will have to shift focus on its various problems. With time, more and more families are moving out of the walled city on the account of expanding families and lack of modern amenities. There is no space available for car parking in the narrow streets of the walled city, as the area was never designed for vehicles. Also the installation of air-conditions and other such amenities may ruin the historic features of the building. The authorities have laid out various conditions to allow the reconstruction of historic buildings which have to be monitored thoroughly. Inspite of valuing their heritage, the residents are burdened under the pressure of keeping it alive. As a result the residents tend to migrate towards the newer parts of the city. The historical buildings being rented to poor migrants and businesses, looking for warehouse space, lead to deterioration of the structure. Also the abandoned, iconic wooden houses are collapsing from neglect. If more and more people keep moving out, it no longer can be called a 'living heritage entity'.

Other Problems

Construction going on in the vicinity of the heritage site may cause damage to a great extent. Air near the construction site is filled with contaminated particulate matter (PM_{10}), Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) and gases like carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and nitrogen oxides which are all harmful to the ancient monuments. Besides noise pollution, some of the construction equipments produce vibrations. Also if pile driving operations are carried out very near to the heritage site without proper precautions, it may damage the foundation of the structure. Thus the laws banning the construction near the heritage sites should be strictly enforced.

There are cases of tangling electricity wires, illegally erected flats and a number of shops around the ancient relics, which is undesirable. One of the other problems is the ornate homes being torn down and replaced by modern structures that are totally incompatible with history. However, after the declaration, there might be a stricter enforcement of rules which will not allow pulling down of the exquisite architectural monuments.

Thus stricter rules and regulations should be laid down and enforced to curb the above stated problems. If the decline and degradation of the old city is not slowed down to a certain extent, then UNESCO can revoke the "heritage" title or downgrade Ahmedabad's listing to "heritage in danger."

WORLD HERITAGE SITE STATUS: PROS AND CONS

The world heritage status provides a unique identity and worldwide recognition to the city. It fetches international attention to the site leading to a magnificent increase in tourism, ensuring economic benefits to the nation. Funds are generated from the global body for the protection, conservation and restoration of the site. It promotes the feeling of pride and prestige. The site is protected against misuse or destruction during wartime under the Geneva Convention. The world heritage status and increased tourism encourages the government as well as inhabitants to keep their surroundings clean. With the world heritage recognition the tenants can avail funds for the restoration of the historic properties by utilizing the TDR policy. Also the home-stay policy enables the tenant to fix a certain rent for room, which further adds to the available fund. Activities such as heritage walks, street theatres and heritage awards encourage the participation of various community members, strengthening the unity among them. Some of the inhabitants who had earlier moved out, have returned to restore their houses and either started residing or converted them into heritage home-stays, thus attracting tourism and generating revenue.

As more and more tourists start visiting, the sites and consequently the entire cities become overcrowded. Thus, in order to meet the increasing demands, the locals become dependent on the tourist trades - opening shops, hotels and restaurants to fulfill the new demand of the travelers. The inhabitants of the heritage properties cannot install modern amenities as it may ruin the historic value of the place. Vehicle ownership becomes difficult as there is no parking space available. The tenants need to take special permission from the concerned authorities to renovate the place, which is granted only under certain conditions and continuous monitoring. Thus the tenants are laden with the responsibility of maintaining the heritage value of their property.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

AMC has played an effective role in the process of conservation of the old city. It focuses on creating awareness among different sections of the society. It aims not only at the conservation of the historic monuments but also looks forward to preservation and improvement of the living entities i.e. the pols. The initiative of reviving the local governance in the pols was undertaken through continuous public participation and in association with the Ahmedabad Community Foundation (ACF) with the key community leaders as the representatives of the community.

AMC is one of the first local bodies in India to bring about a change in the policy in favor of preservation of historic sites. It has commenced several fruitful heritage projects:
•   Restoration of the Walled city of Ahmedabad
•   Setting up of the City Museum
•   Refurbishment of the Heritage Houses
•   Revitalization of Chabutaras (bird feeders)
•   Repair and Development of the Dutch Tomb

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to understand that the success or failure of the preservation efforts is more dependent on the behavior of the inhabitants and their perspective towards the heritage property. Hence it is necessary to cultivate interest and a feeling of responsibility towards the conservation of historic sites, within the people.

The "World Heritage" status increases tourism to a great extent ensuring economic development of the country. But the cultural heritage should not be seen as a means of making money or as something that can be exploited for short-term gain. It should be ensured that the local economies do not become too dependent on tourism, which is uncertain i.e. it can fall as quickly as it rises.

There is a need for the provision of stricter rules and regulations regarding the traffic flow within the walled city and laws banning construction in the vicinity of heritage sites and their effective enforcement, which may otherwise lead to decline and degradation of the monuments, risking the retraction of the "World Heritage" status.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fig. 6: UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova
handing over the certificate declaring
Ahmedabad as a 'World Heritage City' to
Gujarat Chief Minister Mr. Vijay Rupani

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