

Research Paper

# Assessment of the Traditional Design Approaches of the Heritage City of Puri, India

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## Abstract:

*Puri, located in eastern India, is famous for its Kalinga-style temples and traditional buildings. This city has developed its architectural characters over the last 1600 years. This paper aims to analyse the architectural fabric of Puri's old vs new precincts. The applied research method involves site visits, architectural elements and styles documentation, and interviews with subject experts. The outcome of this research revealed that increased tourist counts and commercial activities have surged the construction of new buildings in different architectural styles in the core heritage precincts of Puri. Also, the haphazard construction of mid-rise buildings threatens Puri's traditional architectural characteristics. Moreover, this research prepared an inventory of design elements and styles. The outcomes of this research can be used by the development authorities and policymakers to improve and maintain the architectural characteristics of Indian heritage sites.*

**Keywords:** *heritage sites, sacred sites, architectural vocabulary, Puri*

## 1. Introduction

Ancient heritage sites discourse traditional cultural, social, and artistic achievements of different societies (UNESCO, n.d.). Further, ancient heritage cities are renowned for their classical architectural masterpieces with intricate detailing, showcasing the creative capabilities of various artists, and they have been built for thousands of years (Hiraskar, 1991). Traditional architecture manifests cultural, climatic, religious, and geographical factors and the availability of materials and skilled artists; hence, each heritage place has unique architectural characteristics (English Heritage, 2007). However, with improvements in economic conditions and mobility infrastructure, heritage sites worldwide have significantly changed their morphology, land use and architecture in the 20th century (Rai, 2008). Further, in developing countries, the changes are rapid and unplanned, causing degradation of architectural harmony and loss of heritage uniqueness of the precincts (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

India, a developing country, has 43 World Heritage Sites and several sites of state significance (UNESCO, n.d.). These heritage sites have evolved over a millennium and are part of India's rich cultural, art, and architectural legacies (MHUA & NIUA, n.d.). Millions of visitors throng to these heritage cities and generate employment opportunities and revenues for locals (Ministry of Urban Development, 2015).

However, sometimes, tourism has diabolical impacts on the built environment, as over-tourism causes several unpleasant situations for the locals (Singh, 2007). Since the late twentieth century, Indian heritage sites have undergone major transformations in their land use, transportation patterns, density, and tourist counts (MHUA & NIUA, n.d.). Further, tourism growth has increased the demand for mixed and commercial buildings in heritage precincts (MoUD, 2015). Moreover, the use of international and eclectic design approaches in core heritage precincts has imperilled heritage characteristics, including the architectural fabric of ancient India. This research explores the traditional design approaches of Puri, a major ancient heritage city in India.

### 1.1 Site brief

Puri is the resting place of Lord Jagannath, the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu (Starza, 1993). This city experiences warm and humid climates with an average annual temperature between 28° and 38° C. With a population of 283000 in 2024, Puri allures 18 million visitors yearly (Odisha Tourism, 2024). Further, this place is renowned for its traditional art, architecture, culture, cuisines and festivals. It is a 'Grade One' heritage city (CPWD, 2013) and a 'Type A' tourist town in India (Puri Municipality, 2006). Also, this city celebrates the yearly '*Ratha yatra*' (Cart festival), one of India's largest religious gathering events (G. Mohanty et al., 2010). Considering social, cultural, and heritage significance, Puri is the most preferred case study for this research. Figure 1 shows the location map of Puri in Odisha and India.

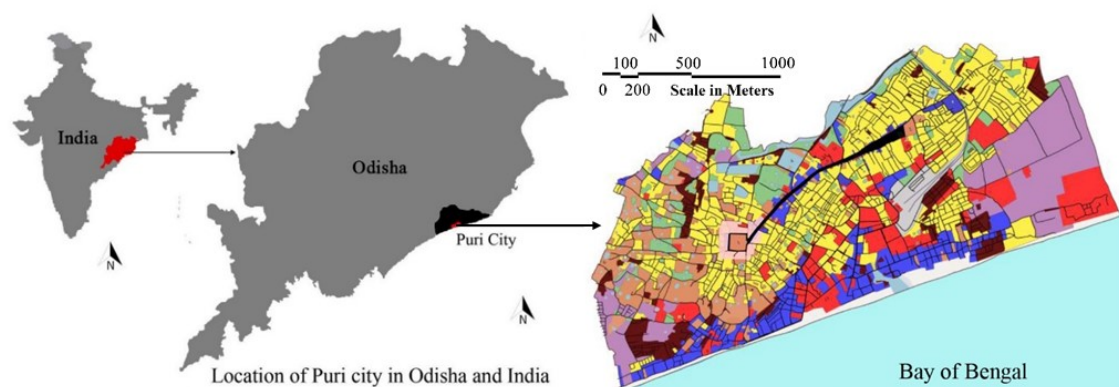


Figure 1: Puri's location in Odisha and India, source: authors

The study is divided into the following segments: introduction, site brief, literature review, research method, analysis, results, discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

Architecture is the physical manifestation of societies' cultural, geographical, climate, resources and religious characteristics (Hiraskar, 1991). Traditional architecture involves the locally available materials, construction techniques and design elements related to the socio-cultural practices of the place. Further, the construction process consists of the craftsmanship of skilled artists and designers developed over time. However, based on scale, design, and materials, the architecture of ancient settlements is classified into two groups: architecture of affluents and architecture of the peasants.

Architectural design is subjective and affected by the aesthetic sensibility of owners and designers. Also, the architecture reflects social, cultural, and religious parameters and societies' economic and administrative stability. Designing a new structure in heritage precincts is challenging as it involves designers' artistic capability and sensibility (English Heritage, 2007). However, on a few occasions, designers fail to understand the artistic characteristics of the built environment and cause visual nuisance through their design, which has no similarities with the traditional settings (Davies, 2003). Nasar (1994) terms this as an 'architect's aesthetics failure' to discourse heritage precinct design approaches. The design of heritage buildings in heritage precincts is classified into three groups: similar approach, mixed approach, and contrast approach (R. Mohanty et al., 2015; Tyler et al., 2018).

Design experts play a significant role in identifying design characteristics and elements of heritage settings (R. N. Mohanty & Mohanta, 2023; Sotoudeh & Abdullah, 2013). Further, Amir Hossein Askari (2012) has advocated for identifying the architectural characteristics and elements of heritage settings to maintain the visual harmony of heritage settings. The major architectural characters and elements comprised building designs, dimensions, materials, colours, and ornamentation (Oppong et al., 2018).

### Kalinga Kingdom

A description of Kalinga cities is mentioned in sacred textbooks, such as Mahabharat and Rigveda. King Ashoka invaded the Kalinga kingdom in 232 CE (D. Das, 1977). Later, under the patronage, Buddhism flourished in Kalinga, including Puri, till the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. (Ray & Misra, 2016). Hinduism revived in India, including in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and Puri became a major site for Vaishnavites in the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. (M. K. Das, 2015). Later, Kalinga architecture flourished in Ekamara Kshetra, the adjacent city of Puri, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The early Kalinga temples were simple and had symbolic representations of elements of other regions; however, later, temples became complex and extravagant (Brown, 1959). The cultural heritage of Puri, which has evolved over the last 1500 years, comprises temples, religious buildings, water bodies, religious guesthouses (*Mathas*), and art and sculpture related to the Jagannath cult (Mohanty, R.N et al., 2024). Figures 2 and 3 show the location of Puri's heritage buildings/structures and heritage precincts.

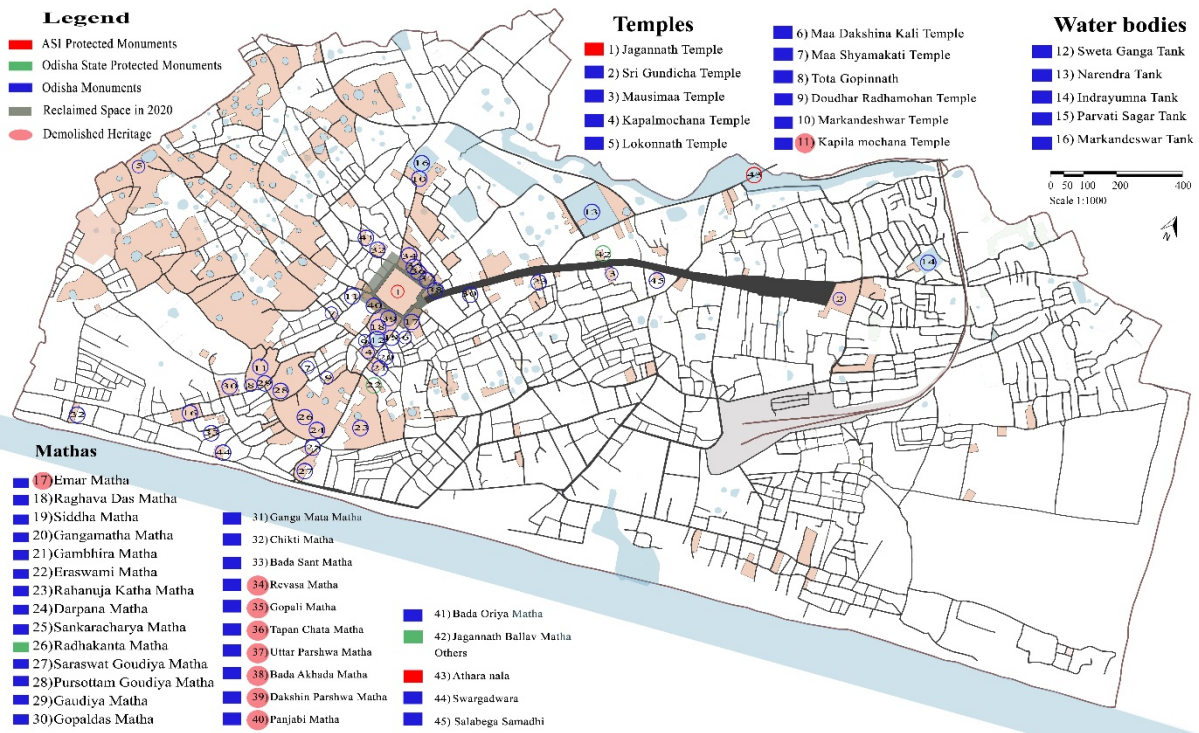


Figure 2: Location of heritage structures in Puri, source: Authors

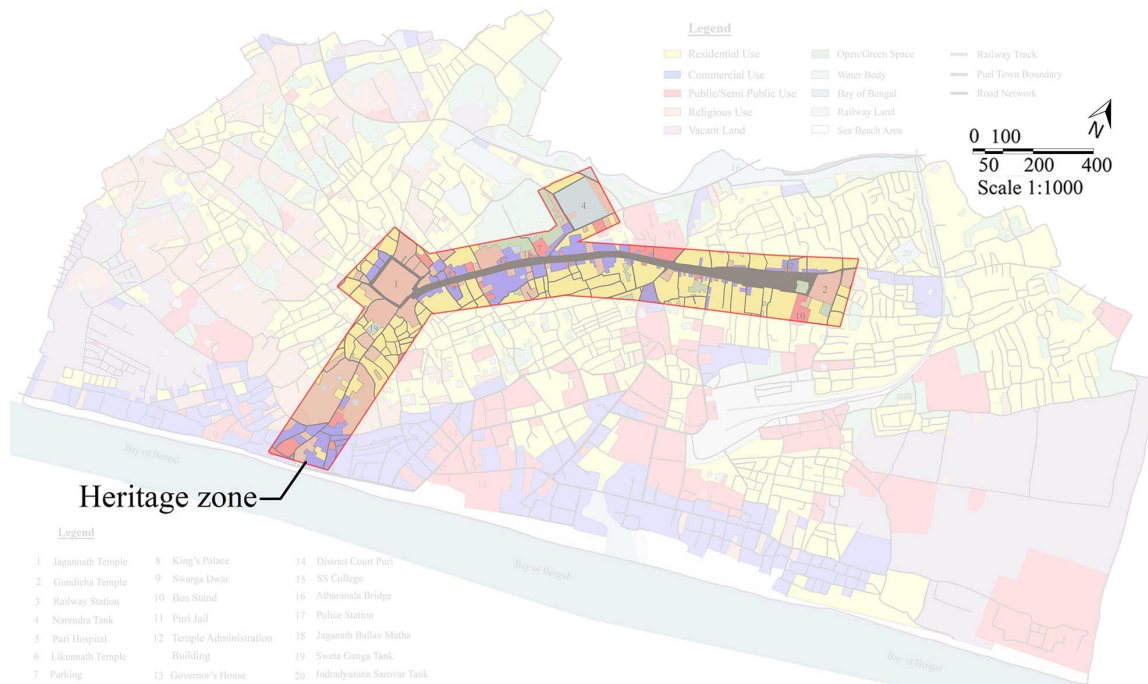


Figure 3: Heritage zone in Puri, source: Authors

### 3. Method

The research idea originated from a leisure trip at Puri. Authors, architects, and teachers by profession have observed changes in architectural characters from the core to the city outskirts. Later, detailed site

observations and literature reviews confirmed architectural character alteration over time. This study involved the following techniques: site observations, digitation, and interviews with historians and subject experts.

Literature related to the history of Puri, site visits, and discussions with subject experts were done to understand the development of Puri's architectural characteristics. Through site observations and literature reviews, 76 iconic heritage buildings in Puri were identified and documented (Figure 5). Further, 13 senior design experts (architects and urban designers) were identified and interviewed to understand Puri's design patterns and elements. Later, experts' opinions were used to categorise buildings' architectural characteristics and prepare building element inventories. The stakeholders are actively involved in different city agencies and have worked with them for over 15 years. Figure 4 shows the research method used in this study.

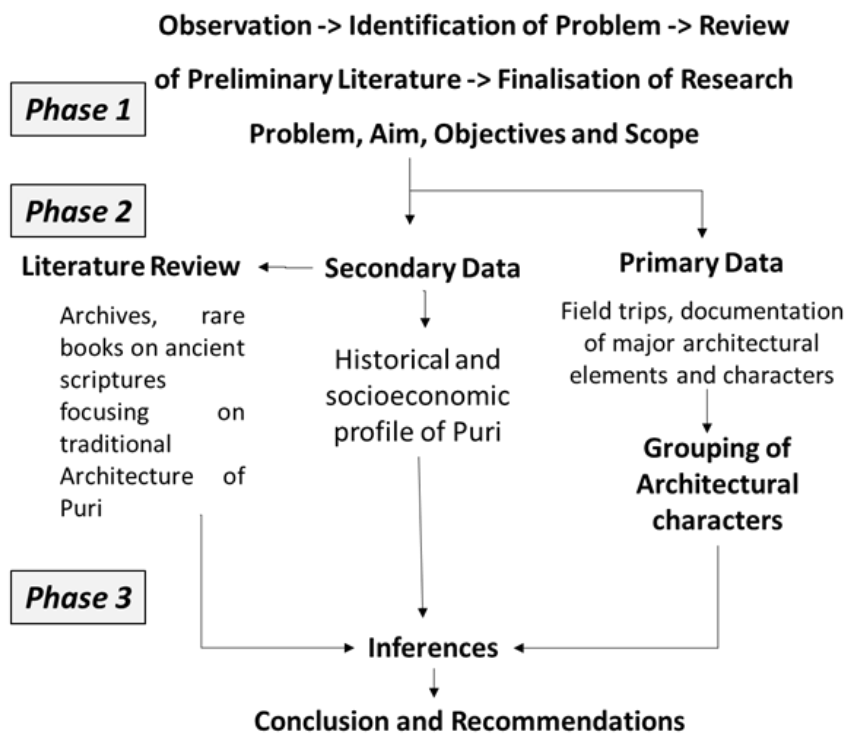


Figure 4: Applied research method of the study

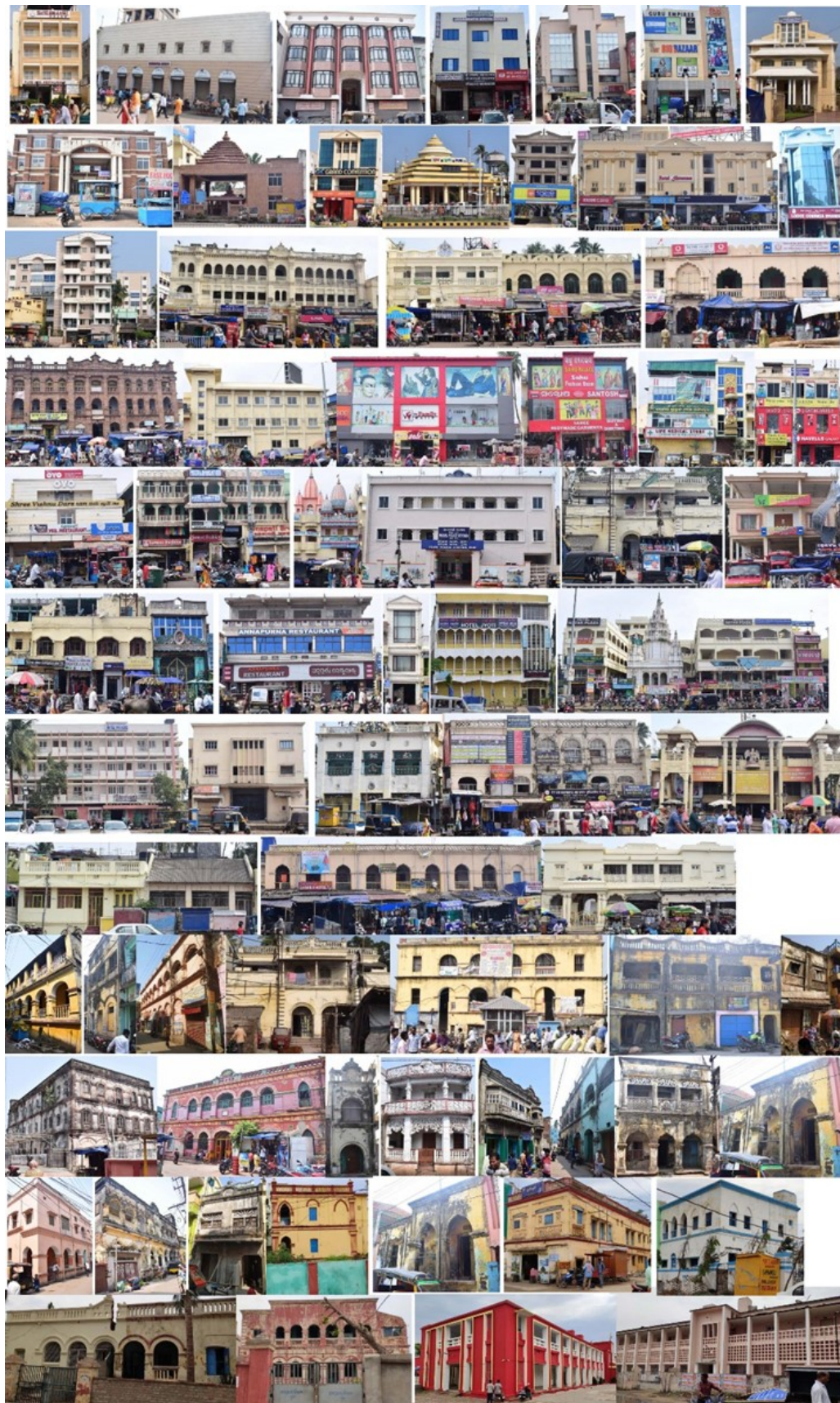


Figure 5: Identified buildings of Puri, source: Authors

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1 Chronological Evolution

The extant literature on Puri reveals that the city's inception of human settlement is traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Later, this city developed from a small fishing town to a prime religious town for Hindus. The literature review has revealed that rulers' political and religious ideologies have shaped Puri's development. Further, according to (G. Mohanty et al., 2010), the mythological layout of Puri is a Conch with the Jagannath temple placed in the heart of the conch on a hillock, Nilagiri (Figure 6). Puri's nascent phase of civilisation was from the 4th to the 9th century C.E. A few temples were built in Puri for Lord Vishnu during this period. Also, Puri was a small fishing town in this period.

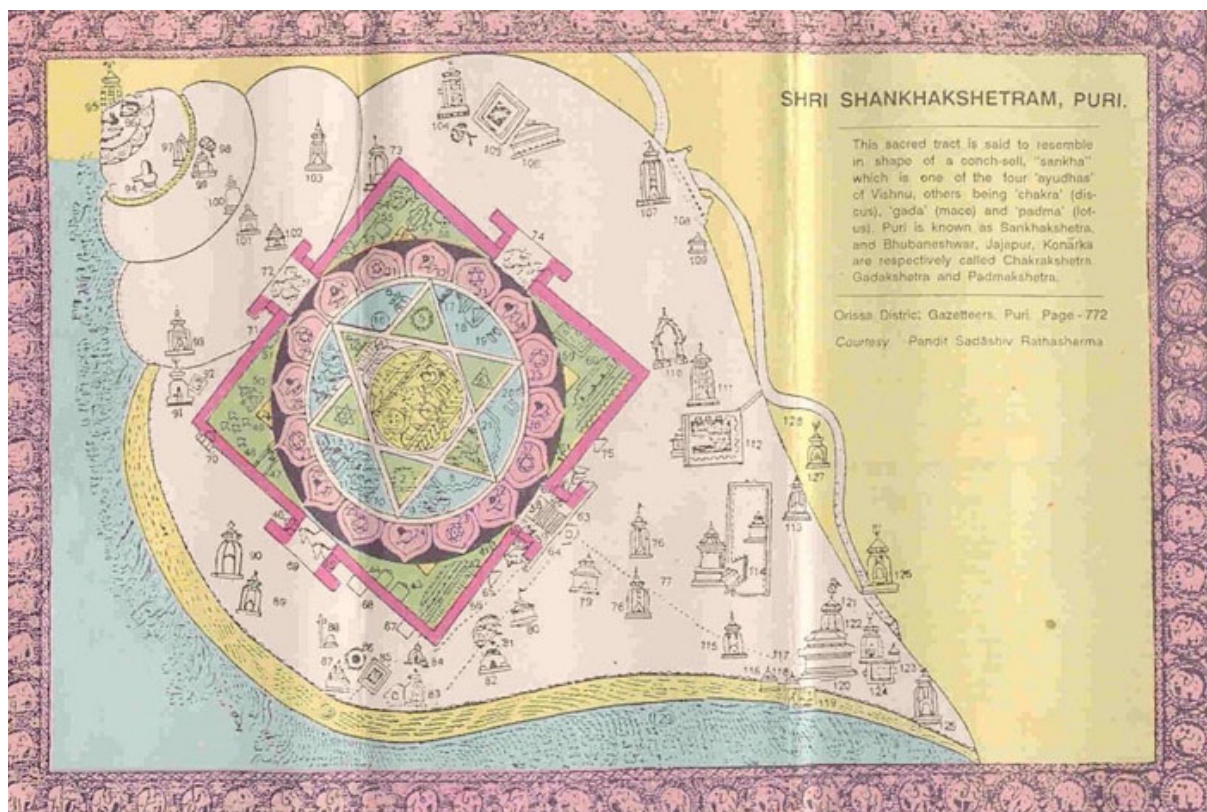


Figure 6: Mythological Conch shape map of Puri, source: (CEPT, 2013)

The period between the 9th and 15th century C.E. is considered the golden period for Kalinga architecture, as the Jagannath temple was started in 1098 and completed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Panda, 2016). Saint Shankaracharya (a Hindu cleric) declared Puri as one of the four most sacred sites (Char Dhams) in Hindus (G. Mohanty et al., 2010). Also, according to (*Jagannath Puri - Home to the Lord of the Universe*, n.d.), after the completion of the construction of the temple, Priests (Brahmins) were settled around the temple in eight colonies by the King for the smooth functioning of the temple. Ramblers with independent courtyards, allies, ponds, and green spaces are significant elements of these colonies. Also, the Gundicha

temple was constructed by Chodo Ganga Deva, a ruler of Puri, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The extant literature suggests that the famous cart festival between the Jagannath and the Shree Gundicha temple was started in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century C.E., many Hindu saints visited Puri; hence, for their comfortable stay, several 'Ashramas' and 'Mathas' were constructed in the surrounding precincts of the Servicemen colonies (refer to Figure 7 a). Later, Afghans and Mughals ruled Puri in the 15<sup>th</sup> century C.E. According to (Panda, 2016), the development of Kalinga temples in Puri was stopped in the Kalinga region during the Afghan and Mughal periods.

British colonial rulers ruled Puri from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Greco-Roman style, they constructed institutional buildings such as the collectorate office, court, and prison houses (Figure 7 c). Also, they brought Bungalow architecture to Puri for the comfortable stay of their bureaucrats (Kalia, 1994). In this period, these bungalows were constructed in a hybrid style, i.e., Indian, Persian and British colonial architecture (refer to Figure 7 b).

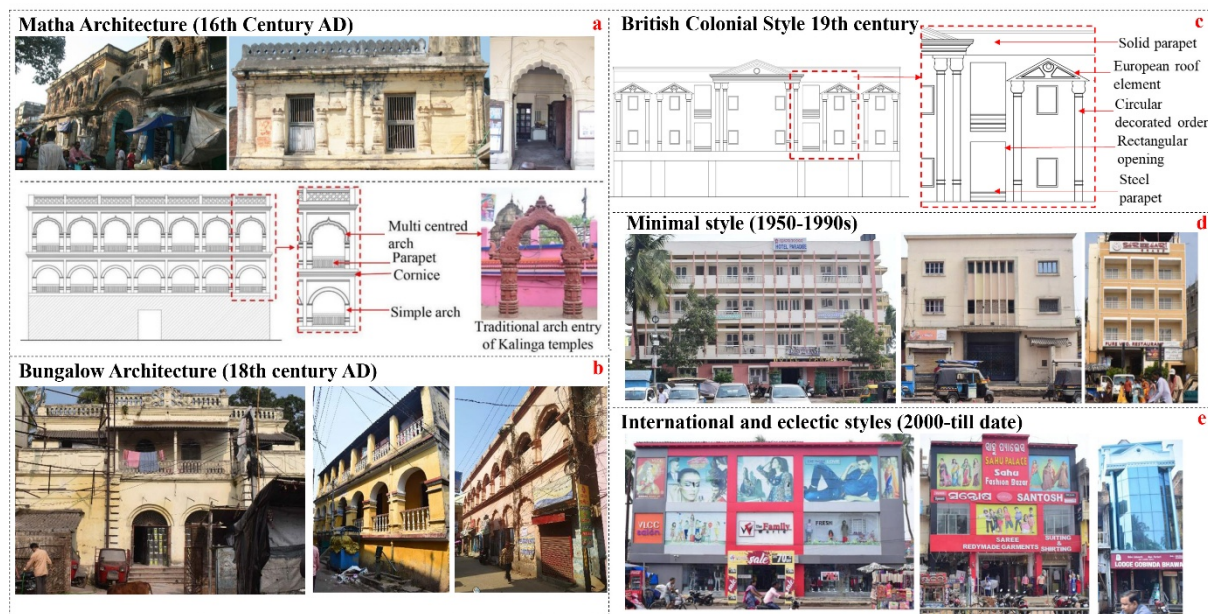


Figure 7: Architecture typologies of Puri, source: authors

The increased tourist count due to the betterment in site's accessibility and transportation amplified the construction of mixed-use and commercial buildings in the heritage precinct and marine road in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Later, the basic amenities of the Puri were improved, and institutional buildings (schools and colleges), commercial (lodges, hotels, eateries, and malls) and residences were constructed in a modern style from the 1960s to 1990s (Figure 7 d). However, since the 2000s, the eclectic style has become the most preferred option for commercial, residential and mixed-use buildings (refer to Figure 7 e). Moreover,

the increased spatial demand has changed the traditional characteristics of Puri's heritage precinct. In 2019, the Odisha government implemented a heritage regeneration scheme, '*Shree Mandira Parikrama*', around the Jagannath temple complex, and 75 m wide corridor spaces (plazas) with public amenities were created. However, several heritage buildings (*Mathas and Ashrams*) were demolished around the Jagannath temple in this project (Figure 3). This project has created displeasure among subject experts (historians and archaeologists) and locals (India Collective, 2019). Different rulers' impact on Puri's development is shown in Figure 8.

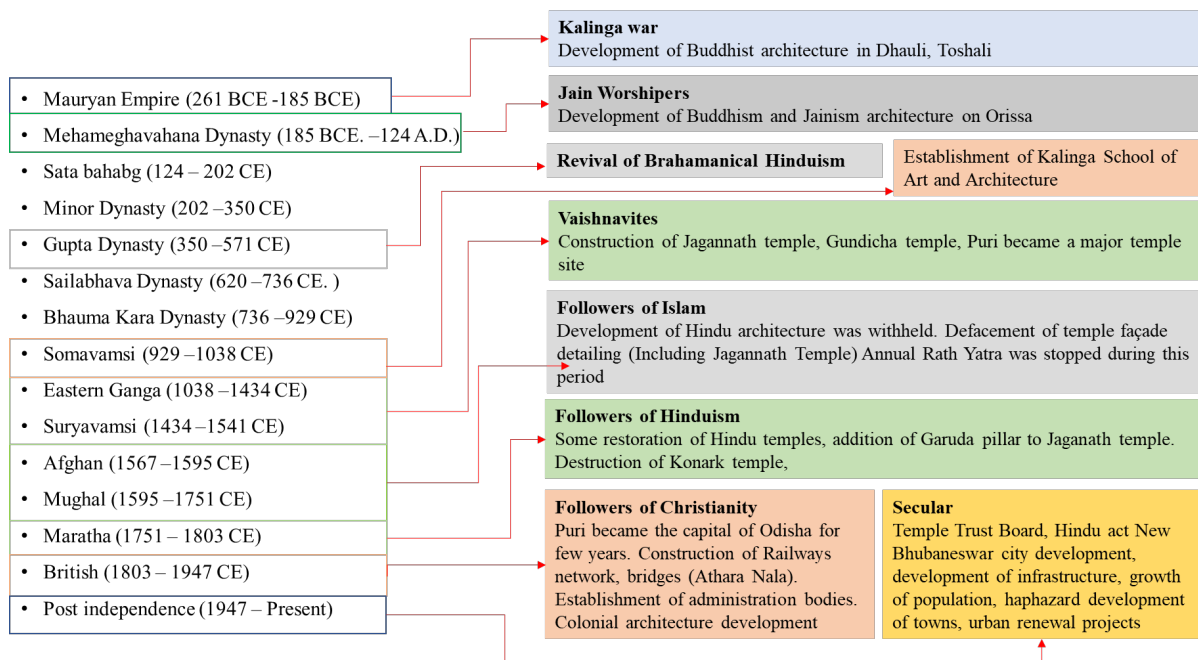


Figure 8: Impact of different rulers on the Built Environment of Puri, source: authors



Figure 9: Transformation of traditional buildings to contemporary buildings, source: Authors

## 4.2 Architectural Characteristics

In Puri, 'Kotah Ghar' Bungalows and '*Chala Ghar*' mud houses are the traditional buildings of the affluent and peasants, respectively. Mud houses are built with stone foundations, mud walls and thatched roofs with timber support. Most of the mud houses have a central courtyard, which is used for informal gatherings and day-to-day activities of houses. However, the Bungalow architecture was introduced by the British colonial rulers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This type of architecture has multi-centred arches, verandahs, flat roofs, and plastered walls and floorings. It uses stone, brick, lime, iron, and clay tiles for construction. Both types of architecture use passive techniques for cooling and user comfort.

However, with globalisation and modernism in Architecture, the traditional buildings of Puri were replaced with contemporary mid-rise and mixed-use buildings (Figure 9). The mixed-use buildings were constructed of cement, brick, concrete, steel, aluminium, and glass. Moreover, unplanned construction in heritage precincts has challenged architectural harmony and heritage visibility of landmarks and heritage structures (Figure 10).



Mishra sahi road of Puri in 1890  
(Source: "Old Photos of Puri Jagannath Temple," 2015)



Mishra sahi road of Puri in 2023



Grand road in the early 20th century



Grand road in 2023

Figure 10: Transformation of heritage precincts of Puri, source: authors



Figure 11: Design approaches of Puri: (a) Buildings designed with classical (Indian) style, (b) mixed approach, and (c) contrast approach, source: Authors

### 4.3 Architectural Design Approaches:

The architectural characteristics and elements of these buildings were categorised by design experts into three groups as follows:

- **Similar approach:** These structures, mostly placed at the heritage zones, were constructed in the 19th century with local stone and lime, such as multicenter arches, ornamentations, and ornamentations (Figure 11a).
- **Mixed approach:** This hybrid style has traditional Indian, European and contemporary elements. This approach is mostly used in residential and commercial buildings (Figure 11b).
- **Contrast approach:** This approach consists of contemporary building materials and modern design elements and is mostly used in recently constructed commercial and mixed-use buildings (Figure 11 c).

Further, the authors classify Puri's buildings into several groups based on their architectural and construction characteristics, as shown in Table 1. The data collection was done in 2022 by the authoes.

Table 1: Building classification, source: authors

| Style                  | Approval                                              | Building Life                            | Building Offset    | Façade materials and finishes                                  | Roof types                        | Land-use      | Buildin g height |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|------------------|
| Indian classical       | Approved by the governing building bylaws             | Medieval era (15th to 18th century CE)   | Attached buildings | Stone cladding                                                 | Spire                             | Religious     | Single story     |
| European classical     | Illegal construction , but follows the basic bylaws   | Early 20th century                       | Separated building | Brick walls with surface groves                                | Flat                              | Institutional | Two stories      |
| Modern/ Internatio nal | Illegal construction does not follow the basic bylaws | Post-independ ence (1950s)               |                    | Simple walls with no ornamentation and painted in ivory colour | Pitched                           | Residential   | Three stories    |
| Eclectics              |                                                       | Post India's economic liberation (2000s) |                    | Brick with external tile cladding                              | Tempor ary roof (tin or thatched) | Commercial    | Four stories     |
|                        |                                                       | Newly construct ed                       |                    | Brick with external glazing                                    |                                   | Mixed-use     | Five and above   |

Site observations and interviews with experts have discoursed major facade patterns of Puri (Figure 12 a). Sandstone and laterite stone are symbolic materials in Odisha. Hence, most of the new public buildings are

constructed with exposed stone. However, ivory is used in administrative buildings, and structural glazing is used in commercial buildings. Further, the traditional multicentered arch and Kalinga columns are elements of the heritage buildings of Puri (Figures 12 b and 12 c). However, site observations have revealed that these traditional elements have been replaced with simple arches, rectangular openings, and Greco-Roman orders in the new buildings.



Figure 12: (a) Structures with classical design approach, (b) structures with mixed approach, (c) structures with contrast approach, source: Authors

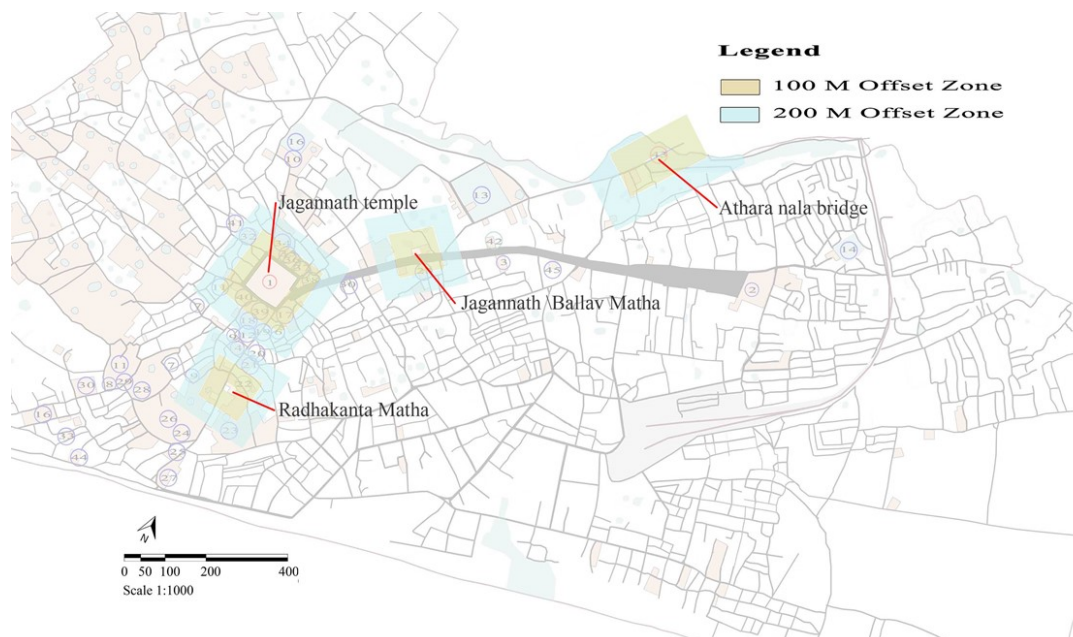


Figure 13: Protected zones in Puri according to the AMSAR Act., source: Authors

### 4.3 Heritage Encroachment and Demolition

Settlements around the Jagannath temple complex developed organically in 1600 years, giving rise to a unique flavour of Kalinga architecture. However, since the mid-20th century C.E., the construction of residential, commercial, and mixed-use structures has increased manifold. Further, these constructed buildings violated the later-implemented AMSAR 1958 ACT, which restricts the construction of buildings around 100 and 200m the listed heritage structures (ASI, 1958). Further, encroachment and the absence of preservation of unlisted heritage monuments are other significant issues for the city. Figure 13 shows the buildings around the ASI-protected structures under the AMSAR Act.

Millions of travellers visit Puri annually for religious, recreational, and heritage tourism reasons. However, most visitors have mixed and negative travel experiences in Puri's heritage-built environment. Hence, a major heritage regeneration project was essential to improve the travel experiences of visitors. The heritage corridor project '*Shree Mandira Parikrama*' was implemented by demolishing several 17th-century heritage buildings and structures. However, the implementation of '*Shree Mandira Parikrama*' project was criticised by historians, archaeologists, and locals as this project replaced the traditional built environment around the Jagannath temple with wide public spaces and plazas with modern design elements.

### 4.4 Experts Perspectives

Interviews with experts divulged that the absence of guidelines for infill buildings is a primary issue related to altering Puri's traditional characteristics. Also, few buildings follow the building bylaws and are approved by the local governing body (Figure 14). Further, the lack of site-specific guidelines has caused buildings in various styles and elements in the core heritage precincts (Figure 14 b). Also, there is a lack of awareness of heritage significance among locals and travellers, and incentives are other reasons for the heritage maintenance of Puri.



Figure 14: Streetscape images of Puri, source: Authors

## 5. Conclusion

Puri is a major heritage site in India. This city has developed its architectural characters under the influence of its rulers over the last 1600 years. Haphazard construction of mid-rise buildings in the core heritage zone is threatening the traditional design elements and ornaments of Puri, which are the major challenges of this city. Also, interviews with experts have revealed that the absence of heritage-related building bylaws and the implementation of building regulations have created several issues related to the architectural fabric of ancient Indian heritage sites.

Design experts categorised the identified buildings' architectural characteristics based on different architectural parameters. Further, an inventory of building styles and approaches was made to create a repository of knowledge and public awareness. Also, interviews with experts revealed major issues related to heritage management and the alteration of traditional characteristics of Puri.

However, this study has the following limitations: this paper does not discuss the economic aspects of the transformation of architectural settings. Also, this paper does not discuss residents' perspectives on architectural elements. Future research could focus on these aspects of Puri's architectural design and heritage management.

## Funding:

This research is funded by the Indian Knowledge System Division, All India Council for Technical Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India (File number: AICTE/IKS/REP1/2021-22/03)

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