Research Paper

Interpreting the locals' perception of a sense of place and well-being associated with cultural heritage in the old town of Bhubaneswar, India

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Abstract

Bhubaneshwar the capital city of Odisha in India is a historic town, with a 20th-century addition of the modern planned city portion and its expansion to meet the emerging needs of the society. The old town comprises 6th to 13th-century old living temples built in laterite and sandstones protected under the Archaeological Survey of India and State Archaeology, water tanks, ghats, a narrow street network, and residences of the Shevayat performing the rituals of the temples. Lack of maintenance of temple precincts and associated water tanks and traffic congestion are the major issues observed in this historic town. The present generation of the Shevayat community migrating to other professions which may disrupt the continuity of this temple town, is disregarded under the Smart City Mission. A structured perception survey questionnaire with closed-ended questions and local demarcations responses on the map of old town Bhubaneswar was prepared from the literature review and the survey collected 123 responses. The research integrates literature review observations, spatial mapping of the perception survey responses from locals using GIS, collected at different locations of the old town, and photographic documentation of visual observations to understand the sense of place and well-being. The evolution of Ekamra Kshetra, the historic town along with its modern expansion into the capital city of the state has had a significant impact on the sense of place and the wellbeing associated with the cultural heritage of the old town. A sense of pride and cohesion is observed in the locals because of accessibility and global outreach attracting domestic and international tourists and boosting revenue generation. The locals including Shevayats, their families, and others expressed that worshipping at temples, participating, witnessing, and celebrating the religious traditions and practices contribute to their place's attachment and dependence, retaining its identity. The GIS-based spatial analysis of hotspots and coldspots from the local's perception of a sense of place and well-being in the old town included mapping of locations that - provide employment opportunities; have accessibility issues; have religious associations; have architectural significance; need waste management, environmental upgradation; and ensure safety. The research identified that elderly residents prioritized religious aspects and sacredness of the temple precincts comprising the green spaces and waterbodies, while a certain portion of the younger generation was looking forward to economic benefits and modern urban experiences. In conclusion, the research provides a holistic understanding of the local's perception of cultural heritage and its impact on their well-being. It mapped the locations in the old town that has identity, attachment, and dependence on the locals, and the areas that need improvement to ensure their collective well-being. It emphasized the role of cultural heritage – the living temples and their associated rituals and practices to safeguard the wholeness of historic towns. It addressed the challenges faced by the locals and the town to ensure its continuity and conserve the sacred geography of the Ekamra Kshetra.

Keywords

Cultural heritage, sense of place, well-being, historic town, spatial analysis

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage in any historic city is an integral part of its identity(Rodwell 2003), image, and character(Silva 2013), (Nursanty et al. 2023) encompassing both tangible and intangible expressions. Monuments, groups of buildings, and sites featuring combined works of man and nature have been defined as cultural heritage under the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972). The practices, knowledge, skills, and artifacts recognized by local communities as learnings transcended through generations were defined as intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003). The term 'spirit of the place' is generally used in studies related to the sense of place, especially in the context of place-making(Dameria et al. 2020a). The spirit of place encompasses both tangible, such as sites and buildings, and intangible, including memories and rituals. These contribute to a place's identity, immersing it with a sense of spirit. Intangible cultural heritage is central in understanding the concept of heritage and must be considered in legislation and conservation of cultural heritage(ICOMOS 2008).

Cultural heritage is associated with values and significance, and perceptions of these vary amongst stakeholders. The Burra charter and National Heritage Act of 2005 in Malaysia define cultural heritage significance as 'cultural heritage having aesthetic, archaeological, architectural, cultural, historical, scientific, social, spiritual, linguistic, or technological value' (Bakri et al. 2015). Currently, the evaluation of heritage significance relies not only on the experts but also on the local community (Havinga et al. 2020). Therefore, awareness, sensitization, and the local community's attachment to their cultural heritage are important for its continuity. Several researchers like (Chirikure et al. 2010), (Li et al. 2020) have observed that establishing people-centered approaches is necessary to recognize the local communities' need for continuity and their involvement in the conservation and management of cultural heritage. Hence, heritage-led placemaking is significant in enhancing social cohesiveness for local and community wellbeing.

Historic cities embody the principles of traditional urban culture and cultural heritage, shaping and reflecting national and people's identities and establishing a connection to the past. Cultural identity issues are becoming prominent in a constantly evolving world. Social components, such as traditional lifestyles, craftsmanship, rituals, and festivals, which were previously (UNESCO 2023). Historic cities in India are unique because of their cultural context and geographical location, and are archives of knowledge systems that require documentation. Protecting India's cultural heritage requires revisiting historical bottom-up approaches through community participation, as informed by the heritage itself, with the knowledge systems approach (Thakur 2002). The involvement of the local community, who are stakeholders in cultural heritage, in decision-making processes for urban planning schemes is a step towards recognizing the knowledge systems in historic towns. An attachment to heritage and an understanding of its global significance are needed for the continuity of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Considering all of the above in context to historic cities of India, taking the case of Bhubaneswar in Odisha, the paper aims to understand the following research questions:

How do the historic town and its associated communities survive in the present times and confirm the continuity of rituals and practices?

What is the perception of the local community about their sense of place and well-being associated with cultural heritage?

How is the sense of place and well-being associated with the cultural heritage of historic cities impacted by the existing planning regulations?

This research aims to assess the importance of cultural heritage to local communities, thereby contributing to their sense of place and overall well-being. Considering the case of Old Town Bhubaneswar, the paper aims to understand the local community's perceptions of their built and natural heritage, as well as the relationships among their cultural identity, livelihood, and well-being. This paper identifies the dimensions of a sense of place that contribute to the local community's enhanced well-being. Hence, it investigates the place identity, continuity, place attachment, and place dependence of locals in relation to cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Role of the local community in continuity

Community-based planning is discussed in the discourse on sustainable development, with a focus on fostering socio-economic change across interdependence among communities. Its successful implementation is dependent on integrated planning, social learning processes, and community support (Nasser 2003), (Deakin 2009). While the concept of community has been used in several social science discourses since the 1960s (Watson and Waterton 2010),(Waterton and Smith 2010) and more recently, diverse interpretations of the concept have emerged in relation to cultural heritage (Mydland and Grahn 2012). The Nairobi Outcome on Heritage Authenticity, presented at the 2025 International Conference on Cultural Heritage in Africa (Nairobi), emphasized the evolution of heritage in relation to community, continuity, and identity. This represents a major change in global heritage governance, reconceptualizing continuity as a dynamic, community-centric approach rather than a result of preservation (Liu and Schofield 2025).

The community's capacity to determine the significance of the past is crucial in preserving cultural heritage and passing it on to the next generations (Murzyn-Kupisz and Działek 2013), (Auclair and Fairclough 2015a). The living heritage method focuses on engaging the local community and the adaptation of heritage to contemporary requirements, in contrast to conventional conservation, which is predominantly expert-led(Miura 2005), (Ashworth and Graham 2017). It considers both tangible and intangible aspects, which are closely linked to the community's religious and spiritual components (Turner and Tomer 2013), (Jigyasu 2014). In 2003, ICCROM initiated a five-year campaign to emphasize the essence of heritage sites and their significance to contemporary community life (Rezaei and Khouadja 2025). Continuity in inhabited historic cities is significant for preserving not just their cultural heritage and historic urban character but also the connections the local community has with the immediate built and natural environment. These connections encompass values, practices, and traditions that determine a sense of belonging and identity. As highlighted by Kevin Lynch, it's the familiar connections that people wish to retain, and the loss of these can lead to a disconnect in sense of ownership and social stability (Khalaf 2020). Researchers like (Wijesuriya and Sweet 2018), (Liu and Schofield 2025) have stated that understanding community connections is essential for effective heritage management, though the current concept of continuity does not encompass its complexities. Therefore, it is necessary to consider local community perspectives when proposing conservation and heritage-sensitive development measures in historic towns. This research seeks to comprehend the role of the local community in the old town of Bhubaneswar, ensuring the continuity of its cultural heritage.

2.2 Sense of place and well-being associated with cultural heritage

The sense of place is significant in heritage conservation, as it provides essential guidance for spatial planning in historic towns (Puren et al. 2008). "It is the psychological feeling that a place brings". Therefore, the sense of place is linked to the emotions with different locations in a historic town, shaped by the associations of the local community(Huang and Chang 2017). Cultural heritage in a historic town connects the sense of place with the sense of time. It focuses on how historic built structures, memories, and traditions are used as resources in the present, rather than just studying the past. This concept signifies

that the interpretations are shaped by current societal demands, allowing an imagined past to inform a heritage intended for the future (Ashworth and Graham 2017). Hence, placemaking plays a vital role in enhancing social cohesiveness, which is essential for community well-being. Several researchers, like (Hay 1998), (Kyle et al. 2004), (Jorgensen and Stedman 2006), (Pérez-Ramírez et al. 2019), (Dameria et al. 2020b), (Zhang & Li, 2021), (Indraswara et al. 2023), in the field of social sciences, architecture, urban planning, design, environmental psychology, and geography have considered place identity, place attachment, and place dependence as the dimensions of sense of place. In this paper, the sense of belongingness and attachment to a place (a historic town) are linked to its identity and connection to its local community. While place dependence denotes the appropriateness of a historic town for fulfilling the interests of the local community (Dameria et al. 2020c) . Therefore, heritage conservation is significant in retaining the sense of place in a historic town(place).

The concept of the sense of place is necessary, as it can bring positive outcomes in historical environments, promoting emotional ties that encourage residential stability among inhabitants (Shamai 1991) and further leads to the resident's well-being.. The recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape(UNESCO 2011) focus on community well-being, stating that it can be attained through effective management of built heritage assets in a historic town, positioning conservation as a means to balance urban growth with quality of life. Promoting awareness about the significance of built heritage amongst the local community contributes to their well-being. Several studies suggest that continued engagement with cultural heritage leads to increased social capital and well-being (Auclair and Fairclough 2015b). The economic well-being of local communities is crucial for the preservation and sustainable development of the historic built environment. Some indicators of this well-being include household income and employment, but sustaining long-term well-being requires the economic viability and competitiveness of communities (Gražulevičiūtė–Vileniškė and Urbonas 2011). Several researchers have mentioned that cultural heritage significantly impacts subjective well-being in local communities and society through six factors: developing emotional connections, enhancing social relationships, providing preferred surroundings, promoting physical activities, and improving cultural accessibility (Sektani et al. 2023). This paper attempts to examine the sense of place and well-being of the local community in relation to the continuity of cultural heritage in a historic town. In Southeast Asia, communities are traditionally connected by shared resources, such as natural heritage and religious entities, shaped by humans and their spiritual associations rather than confined by location. This cultural interaction facilitated the coexistence and exchange of beliefs among the communities (Sapu 2009).

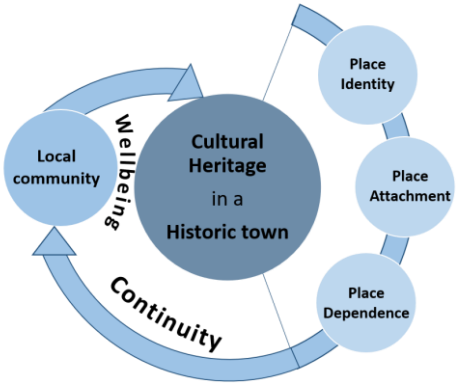


Figure 1. Sense of place and well-being in context to cultural heritage in a histoirc diagram. Source: Author.

2.3 Cultural heritage in old town Bhubaneswar

The historic, sacred cultural landscape of Bhubaneswar, known as Ekamra Kshetra, encompasses types of cultural heritage, including unique temples, mathas, and various water tanks(Das 2023). These structures

helps to understand the continuing practices and rituals of sacredness. The old town area of Bhubaneswar, located within the Ekamra Kshetra Heritage Zone, has been on the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List since 2014. Many heritage structures are present, dating back over 2,000 years, from the 3rd century BC to the 15th century AD (Permanent Delegation of India to UNESCO 2014). Some of these structures are protected by the ASI and state archaeology, while others remain unprotected. The area spans 510 hectares and falls under the jurisdiction of the BMC and BDA, with a population of 843,402.

Not much information is available on the people who built the temples. The text Bhubanapradipa mentions two groups of people – the Pingala, artists, and Ahidhara, carpenters, as the architects. Lingaraj Temple precinct with Bindusagar lake, a major sacred site in the old town of Bhubaneswar, hosts a wide range of religious festivals throughout the year (Prothi Khanna 2019). Like temples, several tanks were excavated, and monasteries were erected, making them sacred to the locals and pilgrims visiting the area. Bhubaneswar continues to be a living center of pilgrimage in Odisha(Mohanty et al. 2021). This research explores the context of the historic old town of Bhubaneswar and its cultural heritage as a case study.



Figure 2. Rameswar Temple, Bindusagar Lake, Puja Panda sahi street, Mukteshwar temple, Rajarani temple, Lingaraj temple precinct

3. Research Methodology

The research used a qualitative method to explore the sense of places and well-being associated with cultural heritage in the old town of Bhubaneswar. It can be divided into four stages, first a thorough literature review is conducted to arrive at the research concerns and questions, followed by data collection using visual and perception survey, and GIS representation of the responses of the survey and its interpretation and conclusion.

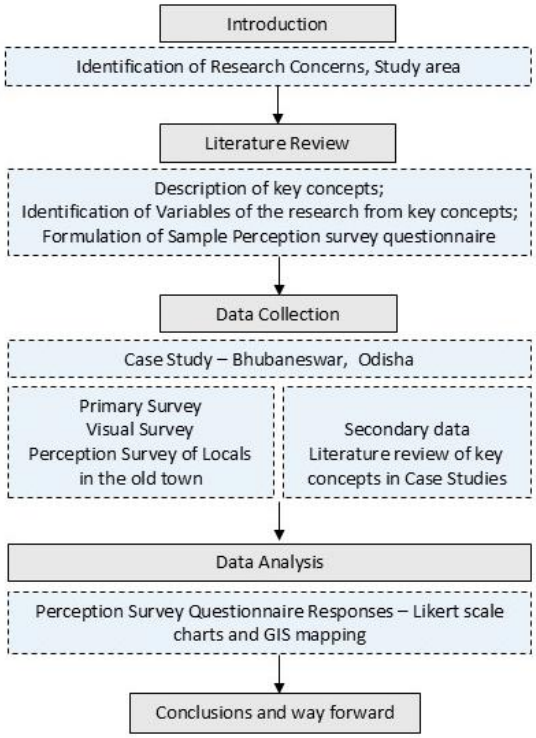


Figure 3. Methodology diagram. Source: Author.

3.1 Study area

The old town of Bhubaneswar, also known as the Ekamra Kshetra Heritage Zone in the state of Odisha, India, is the study area of this research. Five zones are identified in the old town for the visual and perception survey of the locals, with major concentrations of religious heritage places and the associated community. The zones include the Mausima temple precinct, the Rajarani temple precinct, the Mukteshwar temple precinct, the Sahis, the Bindusagar lake precinct, and the Lingaraj temple precinct. The unique cultural heritage of the old town and the rituals and practices associated with the local community makes it appropriate as a study area to understand the sense of place and well-being associated with the cultural heritage.

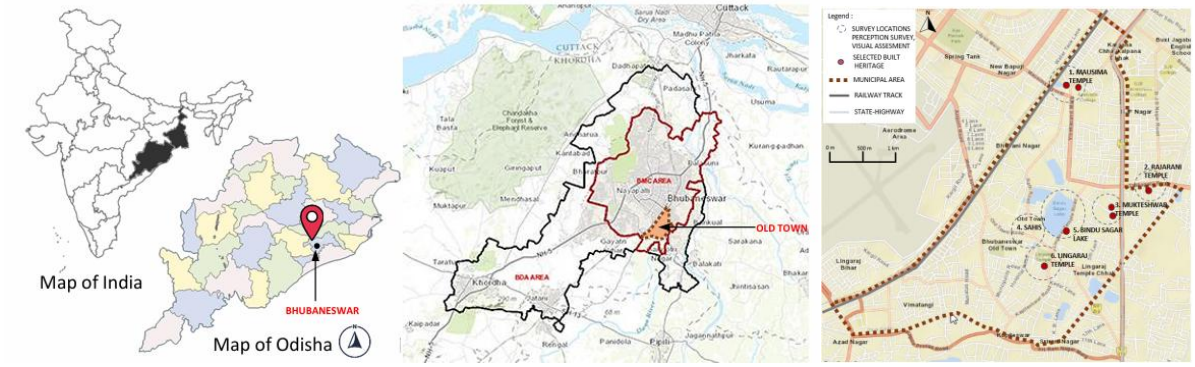


Figure 4. Present map of Bhubaneswar demarcating the BMC, BDA area and the Old town; Mapping by author, Base map. Source – BhubaneswarOne portal, Map of India portal; Study area zones marked.

3.2 Questionnaire survey

A structured perception survey questionnaire with closed-ended questions with local demarcations responses on the map of old town Bhubaneswar was prepared from the literature review and the survey collected 123 responses. Based on the qualitative nature of the research, the sample size was not predetermined, and the snowball sampling method was employed, continuing until data saturation was achieved, at which point no new information emerged. First, the identified locals were briefed on the context of the research. Based on their willingness to respond, interviews were conducted for a duration of 15-20 minutes, and notes of the responses were taken for data analysis. If they were not willing to respond, the next person was identified and briefed about the context of the research. Hence, the research integrates literature review observations, spatial mapping of the perception survey responses from locals using GIS, collected at various locations of the old town, and photographic documentation of visual observations to understand the sense of place and well-being. The variables of sense of place and local well-being associated with cultural heritage were identified through the literature review, and a belief survey questionnaire was formulated. The list of variables and descriptions is given below.

Variables	Description and Perception Question type
Built heritage	I identify with the living temples in Old Town.
Natural features – water bodies, forests, rivers	I identify with the *Pokharis* and their associated rituals in Old Town.
Religious places/Sacred sites	I identify with the sacred sites in Old Town and be myself.
Sacred ecological wisdom	The nature and human connection - *Pokharis*, the festivals associated with temples, yatras, and architectural excellence. It contributes to my connection with the old town.
Religious association – festivals, rituals, and practices - Memories and experiences	I am deeply attached to the festivals and rituals in the living temples, and participating in them brings me great happiness.
Sense of pride	I feel proud of the old town making a mark globally in tourism.
Livelihood, Employment opportunities	I support my family by earning a living through temple service. The earnings from temple service are insufficient to support my family. The Shevayat community is migrating to other occupations to support their families. There are many earning options in the old town, particularly in relation to the living temples.
Unwillingness to move	I happily choose to stay in the old town for the rest of my life.
Pilgrimage, Heritage/ religious tourism	The old town is a great destination for a pilgrimage, offering a unique experience of architectural beauty that attracts both domestic and international tourists, and generates earning opportunities for us.
Planning regulations – preservation of sacred sites	Preservation of sacred sites in the locality is considered in the existing planning regulations by the BDA.
Community Participation	There is active community participation in the rituals and festivals. Our opinion is taken into consideration in the decision-making process of the present government schemes.
Satisfaction with living in the old town	I feel good living here in the old town. There are certain issues related to living conditions that require attention.
Family and community ties	The connection with my family, learning temple service, and participating in community festivals makes me happy.
Environmental upgradation	I am concerned about the existing condition of the water bodies in the old town, the lack of maintenance in the precinct, and I believe that an upgrade is required.

Need waste management	I am concerned with the present waste management by BDA in the old town.
Ensure safety	I feel safe in the sacred sites and precincts of the old town.
Have accessibility issues	I am concerned that the sacred sites are not universally accessible. There is traffic congestion during peak hours.

3.3 Data analysis

The visual survey identified locations that need attention, and the observations were noted. The perception survey responses from the locals were collected using a structured questionnaire and a map of the old town, which included location demarcation, and location specific hotspots and cold spots were mapped in QGIS. The goal of the data analysis was to determine the cultural heritage locations associated with the sense of place and well-being of the locals. The locals identified the zones of cultural heritage, places with religious associations, their memories, expressed their unwillingness to move from the Sahis, tourism opportunities, their satisfaction with living in the old town, and their community relationships. They also identified the locations that need environmental upgradation, need waste management, and places that have accessibility issues. These interpretation from the locals' responses, can be incorporated into policy-making focusing on the local community's involvement in the decision-making process, as the next step.

4. Results and discussions

The old town of Bhubaneswar comprises temple precincts with associated rituals and festivals, water bodies, natural setting, the craft clusters, and the residences of the local community, the shevayats. These reflect the spirit of the old town, encompassing associated values of architecture, history, culture, landscape aesthetics, religion, and economics. From the visual survey, it can be observed that there is a lack of maintenance in the temple precincts and associated water tanks, and traffic congestion due to the narrow street network in this historic town.



Figure 5. Bindusagar Lake; Kedar Gouri temple Pokhari; Ananta Vasudev temple precinct; Sahi street. Source: Pictures taken by the author during the survey in July 2024

The respondents have identified the locations of Lingaraj temple, Bindusagar lake precinct as of maximum significance(hotspots), followed by Mausima temple precinct, Mukteshwar temple precinct, and Rajarani temple precinct as built and natural heritage locations they could identify themselves with in the old town Bhubaneswar, compared to any other location which is not significant(cold spot). The respondents have identified the locations of Lingaraj Temple and Bindusagar Lake precinct as the most significant (hotspots), followed by Ratha Road for Rukuna Rath Yatra, Mausima Temple precinct, Mukteshwar Temple precinct, and Rajarani Temple precinct for their religious associations. The respondents have identified the locations of Lingaraj temple and Bindusagar lake precinct, Mukteshwar temple precinct, as of maximum significance(hotspots) for the employment opportunities associated with cultural heritage.

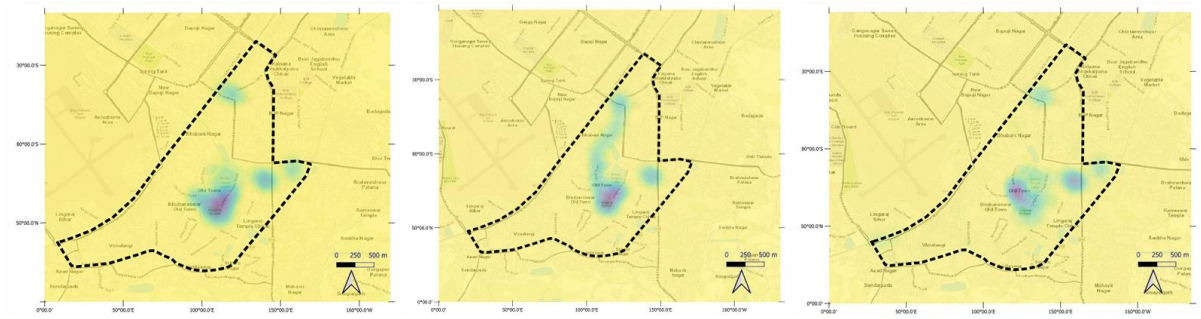


Figure 6. Built and natural heritage; Religious association; Employment opportunities associated with cultural heritage. Source: Maps created by the author in QGIS using perception survey responses from July 2024.

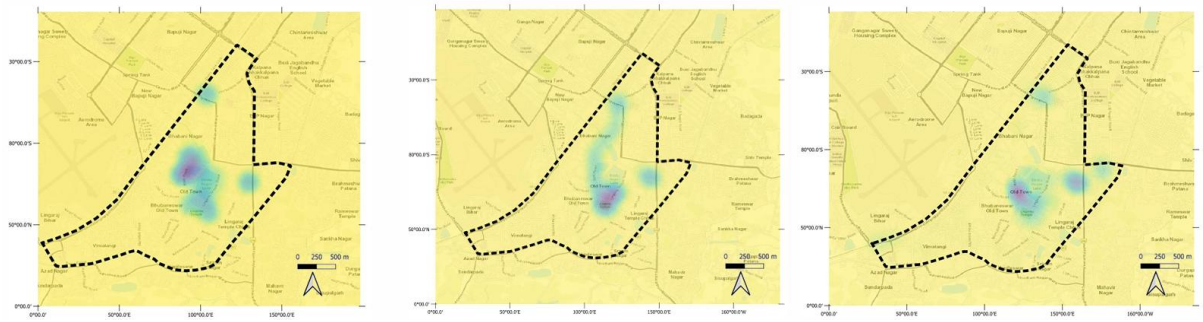


Figure 7. Environmental upgradation; needs waste management; Has accessibility issues. Source: Maps created by the author in QGIS using perception survey responses from July 2024.

The respondents have identified the locations of Sahis, Lingaraj Temple, and Bindusagar Lake precinct as the most significant (hotspots), followed by Mausima Temple precinct and Mukteshwar Temple, as locations with waterbodies that need revival in the old town of Bhubaneswar, compared to any other location that is not significant (cold spot). The respondents have identified the locations of sahis (residences of shevayats) as being of maximum significance (hotspots), followed by the Lingaraj temple and Bindusagar lake precinct, which require attention to garbage disposal issues. The respondents have identified the locations of sahis (residences of shevayats) as being their unwillingness to move, associated family ties, and having accessibility issues due to narrow roads, followed by the Mukteshwar temple precinct. The location demarcation, based on the responses of the local community, identified areas significant to them, the custodians of the cultural heritage of the old town.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of *Ekamra Kshetra*, the historic town, along with its modern expansion into the capital city of the state, has had a significant impact on the sense of place and the well-being associated with the cultural heritage of the old town. A sense of pride and cohesion is evident among the locals, thanks to accessibility and global outreach, which attract both domestic and international tourists, thereby boosting revenue generation. The locals, including *Shevayats*, their families, and others, expressed that worshipping at temples, participating in, witnessing, and celebrating the rituals, traditions and practices contribute to their place's attachment and dependence, thereby retaining its identity. The present generation of the *Shevayat* community, which is migrating to other professions and may disrupt the continuity of this town, is disregarded under the Smart City Mission. The GIS-based spatial analysis of hotspots and coldspots, based on locals' perceptions of a sense of place and well-being in the old town, identified locations that require attention. This understanding will help urban designers, planners, and policymakers incorporate the dimensions above, involve the local community in the decision-making

process, and contribute to heritage-led placemaking. Therefore, it is significant to document the cultural heritage and associated rituals and traditions, and preserve the knowledge systems associated with the old town to take our past to the future.

6. Acknowledgement

Thanking the research facility at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur. The authors are grateful to the Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Government of India, for the Institute Doctoral fellowship at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur.

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