

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPERATIVES FOR A PILGRIMAGE EVENT – CASE STUDY ORCHHA, INDIA

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This study deals with the pulse event of pilgrimage in the heritage rich small town of Orchha in central India. Environmental planning and management for the ingress of large number of devotees on certain festivals annually with respect to the natural and built heritage is the thrust of the study.

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

To understand about any pilgrimage event in India, it is important to understand the religious spirit of India. In India, the deities, prayers, rituals, customs are part of the everyday life as is any economic social activity like farming, merchandising or business or leisure or social visits. Pilgrimage to religious places of special importance are usual and normal for the average Indian. Yet the importance or fragility of its built heritage or natural heritage is often not understood by the Indian on the street because of lack of awareness, discontinuity in traditional environment-sensitive practices and comparative higher pressures of increasing population.

Orchha is one such typical example in India. It is one of the many historical heritage towns of India with an irreplaceable wealth of mediaeval architecture. The advantage of planning studies for Orchha is that it has to a large degree stood still in time in terms of extent of development or changes. It has witnessed ravages of time, desolation and neglect and some degree of unimaginative development and conservation efforts. Hence it is possible to control and promote the physical and environmental development of this town in the right direction through a sustainable approach in planning and execution involving local bodies to understand the ramifications of environmental degradation and tackle it.

2.0 ORCHHA–A BRIEF:



FIG 1 Orchha – an overview

2.1 **Historical background:**

Orchha is a small town in the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India with a population of under 6000. It lies 16 kilometres south-east of Jhansi, a major road and rail junction, just 3 kilometres off the national highway from Jhansi to Khajuraho. Orchha was founded in 1531 by the Bundela rulers and its major edifices were built under the rule of Bir Singh Deo(1605-1627) its most famous ruler. From the turn of the 18th century, the Marathas from western India began to take over power in the region till only the city of Orchha was left to the Bundela rulers in 1730. In 1783 its ruler Vikramjit shifted his capital to Tikamgad after which Orchha fell rapidly to the ravages of time. Once a capital of the Bundelas, the town is a shadow of its history with city gateways, fort palaces, temples and monumental tombs. Set on the banks of river Betwa, it has a picturesque setting with bathing *ghats* or steps along the river side against the skyline of the architectural edifices.

As one approaches Orchha, one passes through the first old gateway which is one of the remaining gateways of the walls of the town.(fig 3) Within one approaches the main market square from where on the left lies the fort complex between the moat and the river Betwa, approached by a bridge. On the right is the Ram Raja Mandir and other temples. Straight along the road one approaches the river Betwa which has a bathing *ghat* or steps along its shore and further ahead is a group of memorials of the Bundela royal family which are quite impressive in scale and style.(fig 2)

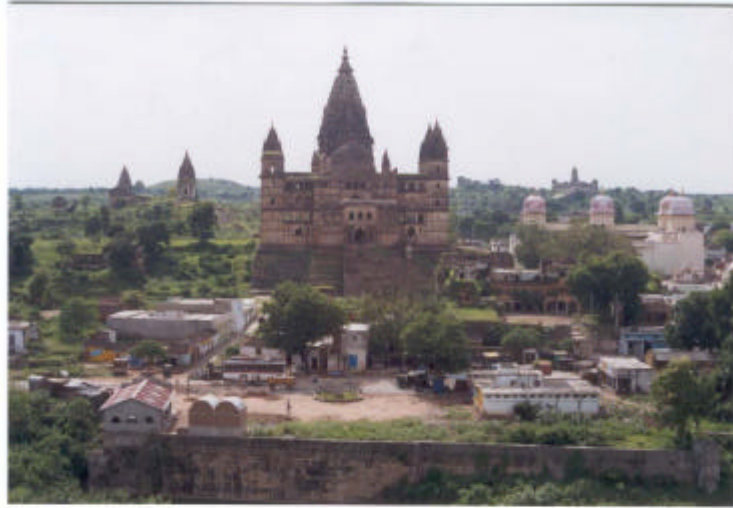


FIG 2 The temples from the riverfront and the view of the bathing ghats further south

Orchha has some fine buildings of Bundela style with interiors presenting the best of the Bundela school of painting in its vibrant murals. Each building within and around the fort complex has its own tale to tell. The architectural style at Orchha can best be described as a perfect blend of Rajputani architecture and the Indo-Islamic styles. The basic construction is in both dressed and undressed stone with lime mortar. Finishes were very well developed with lime *surkhi* plaster blended with marble and shell dust. *Jalis* or window lattices, canopied balconies and *chattris* on terraces are distinct features.

Conserving the built heritage of Orchha including its edifices, palaces, temples and its streetscape is necessary to safeguard the architectural heritage of the region and to foster tourism which is a major economic activity of the town and can grow with proper planning. Heritage tourism and pilgrimage tourism are and can be major economic lifelines of the town through a more sustainable and environmentally conscious development of basic tourist facilities.

2.2 Settlement pattern:

Orchha has a population of 5786 (1991 Indian Census) with about 1045 households. The region is not highly fertile due to stony soil with rocky outcrops. About a third of its working population subsists on agriculture while 20 to 30% are engaged in small business and tourist related activities and about 20% are engaged as contractual labour.

The houses are built along the few main roads of the town. Typically the built form of the town is not obtrusive in scale with the monuments, but stricter heritage controls in terms of street frontages and heights need to be put in place to promote homogeneity and lack of incongruence in new developments. (fig 3)



FIG 3 OUTLINE PLAN OF ORCHHA SETTLEMENT



FIG 4 The central square with Ram Raja temple to the west and the shops on the south road

2.3 Orchha – its religious significance :

Today Orchha is most famous for its architectural heritage and its pilgrimage stature. Orchha has many temples, many of it disused now. But it is most famous for the *Ram Raja* temple whose presiding deity of Lord Ram had been brought from Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Ram. Legend has it that Queen Ganeshkuwari, wife of Raja Madhukar Shah, a contemporary of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, was an ardent follower of Lord Rama and went on a pilgrimage to Ayodha. She prayed to the Lord and the Lord appeared to her in the river Sarayu and she brought the icon of Lord Rama to Orchha travelling on foot with the saints as per certain auspicious conditions. The temple *Chaturbhuj mandir* being built for it not being ready by the auspicious date of its consecration, the idol was installed at her palace the *Rani Mahal* which henceforth became the *Ram Raja mandir*.

The Ram Raja Mandir is a sacred Hindu pilgrimage and receives devotees regularly. The annual domestic tourist number around 650,000 and the foreign tourist number around 25,000. The daily number of visitors to the temple range from 1500 to 3000 and on certain important Hindu festivals like the *Makar Sankranti*, *Basant Panchami*, *Shivratri*, *Ram*

navami, Kartik Purnima and Vivaha Panchami the number of devotees who throng to Orchha range in thousands.

The temple and its medieval heritage is very much a part of the fabric of the town. Tourism forms a major economic mainstay of the town. The town receives as many as 25 thousand foreign tourists and over 650 thousand domestic visitors annually. While daily visitors to the town range from 1000 to 3000 during the peak season from September to March, the ingress of devotees on certain religious festivals range from 10,000 to 10,00,000.

FESTIVAL	APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF VISITORS
<i>Maakar Sankrant</i> (January 14)	50,000
Basant Panchami (February)	20,000-25,000
Shivratri (March)	20,000
Ram Navmi (April)	10,00,000
Kartik Poornima (October-November)	20,000
Vivaha panchami(November-December)	25,000- 30,000

The devotees generally come from the neighbouring districts and states by buses and from the railway junction at Jhansi by buses or tempos, a form of local transport equivalent to a van. The activities on the auspicious days include obeisance to the deity at the temple, buying of sacred offerings which include incense, flowers and sweets, partaking of mass meals or *bhandara* provided by the temple authorities, a religious dip in the river waters by some, and participating in the fair or *mela* held during these days which have upto 150-180 stalls selling items ranging from offering materials, idols, metalware, trinkets to toys, clothes, convenience household items as also game and fun rides. These *melas* are regular rural social events.

2.4 **Administrative set-up:**

Orchha lies in the Niwari *tehsil* of Tikamgarh district of the central state of Madhya Pradesh. The district administration has its headquarters at Tikamgad, 70 kilometres south of Orchha. The local administration consists of the village Panchayat which has a staff of about 15. Orchha was under a Special Area Development Authority for a few years to promote its tourism potential and oversee its heritage conservation. The fort complex at Orchha is directly under the Archaeological Department of India and is under heritage conservation programs under national and state conservation organisations.

3.0 ORGANISATION OF THE PULSE EVENTS :

Organising the pilgrimages is a combined effort of the local administration, the temple trust and the local residents of the town. In terms of space, the large open space near the Ram *Mandir* is used as the gathering place for the visiting devotees. Organising and controlling traffic, to and from the town, including providing parking is a major aspect. The town lies within a couple of kilometres, restricting the need for transport within the town. Law and order is the responsibility of the district administration.

3.1 Existing Infrastructure :

The normal water requirements of the town is met by water lines from the river and underground bore-wells, but catering to the influx of 100,000 puts a major strain in providing water and drainage facilities. Some of the festival rituals entail bathing on the river banks by the devotees. Use of the town by such large numbers and the large amount of offerings to the gods in terms of flowers, sweets and clothing which are generally consecrated to the holy river waters create large amounts of solid waste dumping onto the river and the moat.



FIG 5 Dumping on the moat front & view of the moat and the bridge to the fort

Drinking water is supplemented by the local administration by tankers and the temple authorities and locals, but these are inadequate to meet the high demands on *Ram Navmi*.

There is no centralised drainage or sewerage system for the village settlement . The major resort establishments have their own sewage treatment plant. Toilet facilities are provided by public toilets and tourist establishments like hotels, restaurants and *dharamshalas* (charitable guest houses), but these are woefully inadequate for such large numbers. It is important to provide adequate toilet and drainage facility to avoid the environmental pollution of the town and the river.

In terms of electricity, the infrastructure is fair but overall shortage of power in the state affects the town also. So while the daytime activities do not make heavy demands on the electrical infrastructure, night-time activities are restricted and supplemented by generators when necessary.

3.2 **Proposed environmental planning for the pulse event:**

Orchha is a settlement rich in natural and built heritage. The pulse pilgrim events sustain the town to a large degree , yet the heritage and the environment of the town is endangered by the pressures of the annual pulse events. Hence, it is proposed to prepare and execute an environmental upgradation program for this heritage town to safeguard its built and natural heritage and enrich its religious and tourism appeal.

- Upgradation of its water resources:
 - water conservation efforts through building of water catchment tanks near the temple complex
 - upgrading the supply of water from the river through additional pumps at the time of pulsar events
 - forest conservation programs in the district
- Provision of toilet facilities:

It is proposed to develop a group of 350 temporary toilet facility like privy holes with temporary mat partitions in one of more groups to cater to 10,000 people at a time. The concept shall be to provide hygienic sanitary facilities without despoiling the natural environment and allowing for natural nitrification of wastes without high technology inputs. On higher ingress than 50,000, additional spaces shall be allocated for toilet facility.

- Solid waste disposal scheme:

It is imperative to adopt more environment conscious methods of waste disposal in the town. The segregation of non-degradable wastes like plastic and metal is imperative which can then be sent to the processing units at Jhansi. Vermiculture pits could be developed for the degradable waste in the open outskirts.

- Upgradation of moat banks:

The western banks of the moat should be developed as a permanent green recreational area with shaded leisure space and access to the river banks providing facility of river water rituals near the temple.(area 3 in fig 3)

Provision of these facilities will also help Orchha expand its tourism based activities like the Orchha cultural festival.

3.3 Socio-cultural measures:

Religious events cannot be restricted in any form, so to organise it efficiently, it is important for the local administration and the temple authorities to work jointly. Awareness about the environmental protection needs and its measures need to be disseminated to the locals through participatory programs. The economic benefits of tourist amenities in a tourism based economy need to be clearly understood by the local residents.

Heritage sensitive zoning and building regulations need to be put in place to ensure architecturally controlled and heritage sensitive development in the expansion of the town which will only enhance the living standards and the tourist attraction value of the town.

4.0 CONCLUSION:

This study has basically focussed on the effects of the festival events on this small settlement of heritage value especially in terms of provision of infrastructural facilities like water, drainage and transport and the effects on the economic and environmental fabric of the town

The study has researched the infrastructural requirements of the pilgrimage days and studied the feasibility of options to meet these requirements and foster a balanced and sustainable economy for Orchha.

Glossary of Indian words:

(Indian words in *italics* in the text)

1. *Bundela* : name of a ruling dynasty in north and central India
2. *bhandara* : community meal
3. *chaturbhuj* : four-armed
4. *chhaja* : projection generally over window openings
5. *chhatri* : canopied memorial structure
6. *dharamshala* : charitable guest houses
7. *diwan-e-aam* : hall of public audience
8. *ghats* : bathing steps along a water body
9. *jali* : lattice generally in stonework
10. *mahal* : palace
11. *mandir* : Hindu temple or place of worship
12. *mela* : fair
13. *Panchayat* : village level democratic administrative body
14. *Raja* : King
15. *Rajputani* : style of the Rajput clan of Kshatriyas in Rajputana
16. *Rani* : Queen
17. *surkhi* : finely ground brick used in plaster
18. *tehsil* : administrative sub-unit of a district