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Image of a Sacred City: Portraying Sacred values of Historic Urban Landscape of Sylhet city, Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Historic Urban Landscape Approach by UNESCO presents a new perspective on urban conservation by visualizing cities as a living cultural landscape, changing the traditional idea of the "Historic city" concept. Like many Indian sub continental cities, the cultural-religious spaces have continuously shaped the urban morphology of Sylhet over time and given it an identity as a sacred city. The purpose of this study is to identify Sylhet's spiritual layers through cultural mapping and attempt a critical assessment of the sacred scapes' connectivity to the city's historic urban landscape. This mapping method consists of four methodological steps: proper identification, data collection, documentation, and digital mapping of cultural resources. This research will give heritage scholars better insight into the sacred roots of the historic urban landscape process. The spatial layers of religious heritage sites can be used as an essential instrument for urban planning and to develop a heritage-led vision for the city.

Keywords: Sacred city, Historic Urban Landscape, Digital mapping, Urban Conservation.

1. Introduction

Sylhet is a city that stands out with its unique characteristics, both in terms of its topography and its morphology. Setting it apart from other cities in the country, Sylhet's mausoleums hold great significance in defining its existence and activities. The city's religious practices have a long and rich history that dates back to the time when Sylhet was known as Jalalabad, under the governance of Muslim rulers. During this period, numerous Islamic intellectuals flocked to the city, with some choosing to settle there for an extended period.

These Islamic intellectuals played a crucial role in spreading the teachings of Islam across various parts of the city. Their contributions to the community and the people demonstrated the value of their presence. Many mausoleums, bearing the names of these spiritual leaders and serving as places of worship and spirituality, still grace the city today. As people from different locations gather at these mausoleums, they share mutual respect for each other's religious convictions.

Although the mausoleums are currently managed differently, they continue to have a significant impact on the urban fabric of Sylhet. They are connected to the city through various dimensions, including cultural, spiritual, economic, and touristic aspects. By observing the presence of individuals and the overall activities taking place, one can distinguish each mausoleum from the others. By studying and evaluating the sacred values of these mausoleums, which are integral components of Sylhet's ancient urban environment, this research aims to highlight their sacredness and the inclusive nature of these sacred spaces. Ultimately, these sacred spaces have a profound impact at the community level (Aziz Amen & Nia, 2018, Amen & Kuzovic, 2018, Amen & Nia, 2021, Aziz Amen, 2017). They contribute to the city's economy, attracting tourists who are interested in exploring the rich history and sacredness of Sylhet. These mausoleums serve as custodians of the city's historical and religious heritage, preserving the sacred essence of Sylhet throughout the ages. Their presence not only enriches the spiritual lives of the residents but also fosters a sense of unity and reverence among the people. Thus, the mausoleums of Sylhet hold immense cultural, historical, and social significance, shaping the city's identity and contributing to its overall development and well-being.



  Survey locations in Sylhet area

Figure 1: Survey locations

2. Methodology

In the whole research process, some specific steps were followed to identify the impact and influences of those values.

The focus was on the observation of the researchers. Use pattern, existing condition, and impact on the locals; were the main concern in the research process. To do so, some specific sectors were picked to work on further. The mapping approach used in this work consists of four subsequent methodological steps. The steps of the method are:

- 2.1. Proper Identification:** The mausoleums of the city were identified with the consideration of their values and significance. The Mausoleums were selected considering the existing urban settlements of Sylhet. The criteria were considered as urban settlement, sub-urban area, and river-side area and in natural settings. Images of the activities and existing settings were taken to provide an idea of the impact of Mausoleums in its; surroundings.



Images 1: Shahjalal (R.H.) mausoleum and activity pattern



Images 2: Shahparan (R.H.) Mausoleum



Images 3: Kazi Nasiruddin Shah Sipah Shahla (R.H) Mausoleum



Images 4: Chasnipir Mausoleum



Images 5: Gaila Shah Mausoleum



Images 6: Jongol Shah-Mongol-shah Mausoleum

2.2. Data Collection: All the information were gathered during on-site visits. The state of a site and human activity are reflected in its visuals. The data collection was more focused on observation and human behaviour analysis.

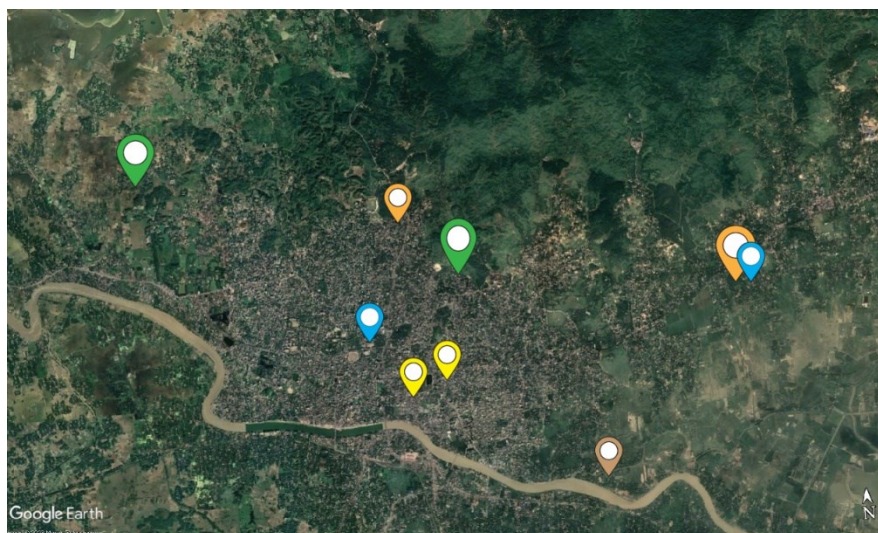


Figure 2: Site selection typology

- 2.3. Documenting the Location:**
 The mausoleums all have an impact on the sites because they are in distinct places. The mausoleums and the individuals are connected. It is necessary to determine the types of activities that take place at the locations.
- 2.4. Discussion and Results:** The reasons and justifications of the mausoleums are given through all the data and conclusions. These results will demonstrate how the mausoleums' standards and values are reflected in them. Moreover, it was intended to highlight the impacts of those sacred spaces in the community, in broader scale, in the region. Finally, a matrix chart was generated to show case the impact analysis of those mausoleums.

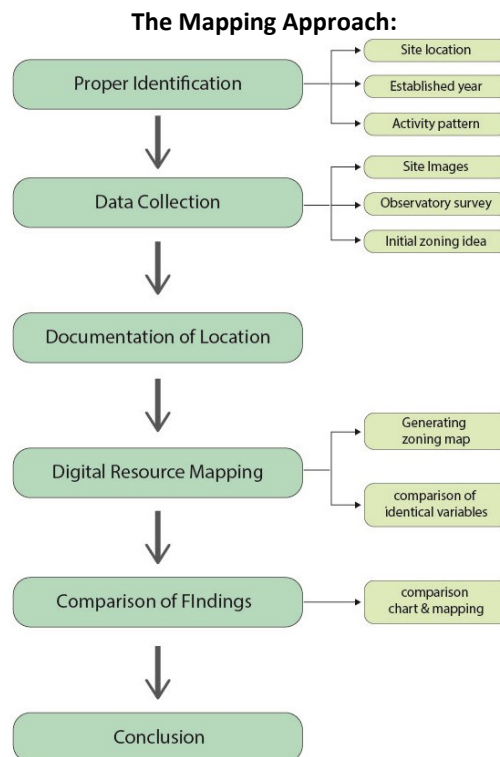


Figure 3: The Mapping Approach Methodology

3. Results

We can determine the relative impact of each component on the mausoleums by evaluating the values associated with all of them. The mausoleums of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.), Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.), Chasni Pir, Jongol Shah-Mongol Shah, and Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipah Shahla (R.H.) hold significant **historical value** and are in excellent condition. These mausoleums have played a crucial role in the region's history and are well-preserved.

On the other hand, the cemeteries of Galia Shah and Gazi Kalu are not in good condition, indicating a lack of proper care and maintenance. Thus, when considering cultural worth, the impact of Hazrat Shahparan (Rh) tomb is of medium significance. The mausoleums of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) and Chasni Pir have minimal impact in this aspect, and for the remaining mausoleums, the **cultural worth** gradually becomes exceptionally low.

In terms of **community relevance**, the mausoleums of Kazi Jalaluddin and Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipah Shahla (RH) hold a medium status. These mausoleums have significance within the local community, but the remaining mausoleums are in a lower state, followed by those of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.), Gaila Shah (R.H.), and Jongol Shah-Mongol Shah.

When analyzing religious values, the mausoleums of Hazrat Shahjalal (RH), Hazrat Shahparan (RH), and Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipah Shahla (RH) are in excellent condition. These mausoleums hold immense **religious importance** and are revered by the followers of the respective faiths. Additionally, both Chasni Pir and Jongol Shah-Mongol Shah mausoleums are situated in natural settings. In contrast, the condition of the remaining mausoleums is exceedingly poor in this regard.

Considering the natural impact, the mausoleums of Chasni Pir, Jongol Shah-Mongol Shah, and Gazi Kalu are in excellent condition, showcasing their harmonious integration with the surrounding nature. However, Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipah Shahla's (R.H.) tomb is in a poor condition, and the others are in even worse condition in terms of their **natural impact**.

Examining **economic worth**, Hazrat Shahjalal's (R.H.) mausoleum is in excellent condition, indicating its potential to contribute significantly to the local economy through tourism and pilgrimage. Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) mausoleum is in good condition in this regard, while the other mausoleums are in very low condition. Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipah Shahla's (R.H.) mausoleum holds a medium condition concerning economic worth.

From a **tourism standpoint**, the mausoleums of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) and Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) are in excellent condition. These mausoleums attract a significant number of tourists, contributing to the promotion of religious and cultural tourism in the region. The other mausoleums are in a very low status in terms of their tourism value, while Chasni Pir and Gazi Kalu's mausoleums hold a medium state.

In summary, the analysis intended to evaluate the impact of these sacred spaces on the community and society. Parameters such as their economic impact, tourism value, historical significance, religious importance, and natural integration were considered. These mausoleums represent the sacred value within the urban settlement of Sylhet city and contribute to the overall impact of sacred spaces in the region. The final outcome was an impact matrix which was generated from the observatory survey and findings.

Table 1: Impact analysis matrix (The comparison chart):

	Very low	Low	Medium	Good	Very good			
Study case:	Hazrat Shahjalal (Rh)	Hazrat Shahparan(Rh)	Chasni Pir's mausoleum	Kazi Jalaluddin(Rh) mausoleum	Galla Shah's Mausoleum	Jongol Shah-Mongol shah's Mausoleum	Hazrat Nasiruddin sipah shahla(rh)	Gazi Kalu's Mausoleum
Economy	Very good	Good	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low	Medium	Very low
Tourism	Very good	Very good	Medium	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low	Medium
History	Very good	Very good	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low	Low	Medium
Cultural	Low	Medium	Low	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low	Very low
Social	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Very low
Community	Low	Very low	Very low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Very low
Religious	Very good	Very good	Medium	Very low	Very low	Very good	Very good	Very low
Natural	Very low	Very low	Very good	Very low	Very low	Very good	Low	Very good

Table 1: The impact analysis matrix

3.1. Impact on the community:

Economically Significant: Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) Mausoleum, Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) Mausoleum.

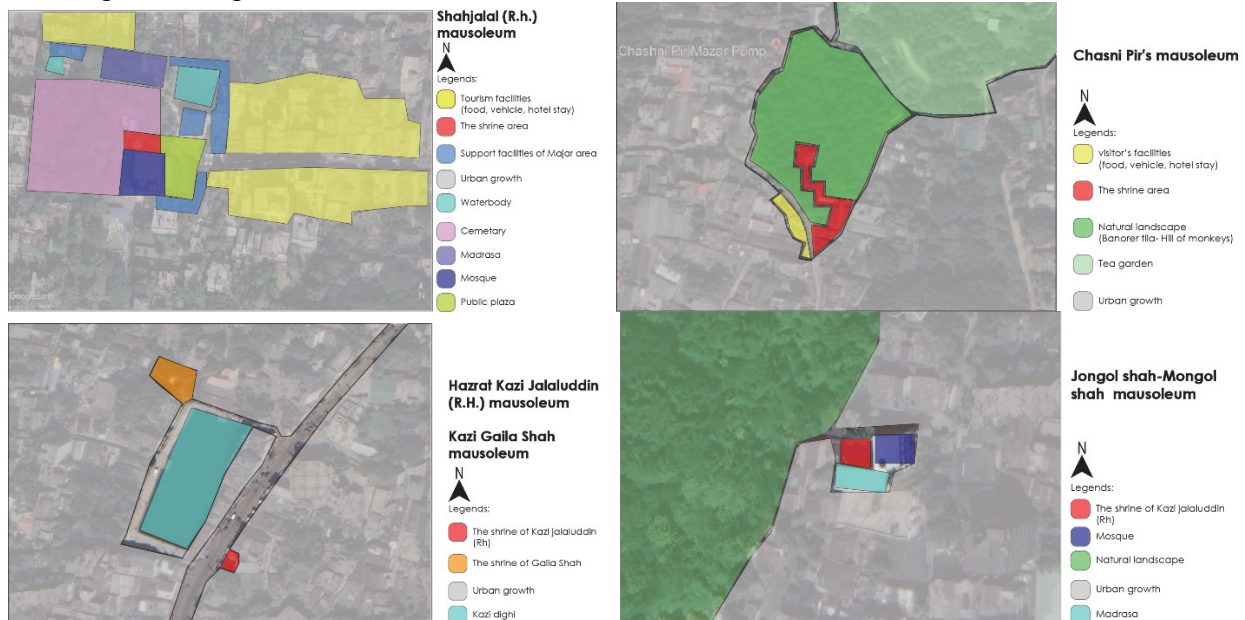
Tourism Significant: Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) Mausoleum, Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) Mausoleum

Historical value: Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) Mausoleum, Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) Mausoleum, Chasnipir Mausoleum, Kazi Jalaluddin (RH),Jongol Shah-Mongol Shah’s Mausoleum.

Religious Activities: Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) Mausoleum, Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) Mausoleum, Hazrat Nasiruddin Sipah Sahla (R.H.) Mausoleum.

Natural influence: Chasni pir Mausoleum, Jongol Shah-Mongol Shah’s Mausoleum, Gazi Kalu’s Mausoleum.

Respecting the matrix and analysis, initial zoning data was generated to showcase the impact of those sacred places on the regional zoning as well.



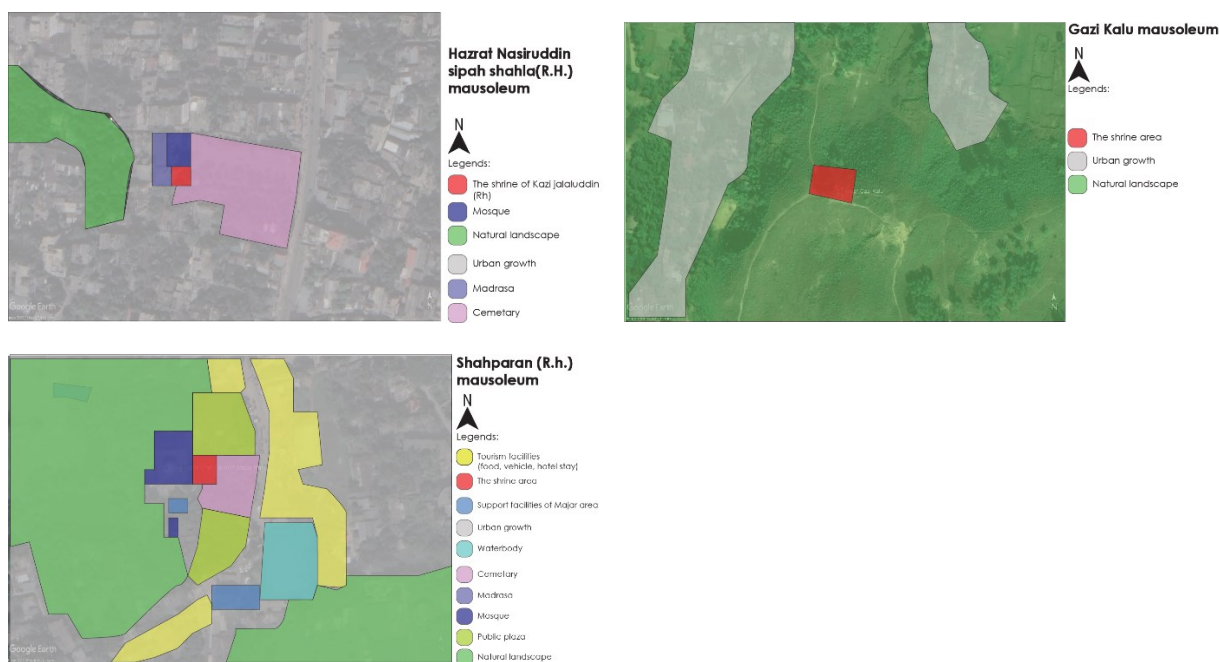


Figure 4: Existing zoning of surveyed Mausoleum showcasing the impact.

4. Discussion

Mausoleums hold significant influence and impact, as evidenced by numerous studies and poll results that analyze individual concerns. These assessments take into account a variety of factors that contribute to the significance of these structures. One such factor is the dynamics within the community itself. Mausoleums often serve as gathering places for people, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity among the residents of the city. This communal aspect enhances the overall impression of the mausoleums and strengthens their influence.

Economic considerations also play a role in the assessment of mausoleums. These sites have the potential to attract tourists from far and wide, contributing to the local economy through increased business and job opportunities. The historical value and cultural significance of mausoleums further enhance their impact. These structures act as reminders of the city's rich heritage, preserving the memory of past events and individuals who have made a significant contribution to its development.

Religious activities associated with mausoleums are another important aspect. In the case of Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) and Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.) mausoleums, their ongoing religious practices attract people from diverse regions. This debunks the misconception that such sites are only of local interest. These mausoleums hold a special place in the hearts of the faithful, serving as places of worship, pilgrimage, and spiritual solace.

However, it is important to note that Sylhet is home to many other equally remarkable mausoleums. Some of these structures boast exceptional natural beauty and captivating features that enhance their allure. These mausoleums contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal of the city, making it a visually stunning destination.

Collectively, the presence of mausoleums has elevated the city of Sylhet to a revered status throughout the nation. The unique mausoleum culture in Sylhet sets it apart from other urban centers across the country. The undeniable influence and impact of these sites on the urban landscape contribute to the distinctiveness of Sylhet and its reputation as a sacred place in the hearts of its residents and the nation as a whole.

In conclusion, mausoleums hold significant influence and impact, influenced by various factors such as community dynamics, economic considerations, tourism potential, historical value, cultural significance, and religious activities. The mausoleums in Sylhet, particularly Hazrat Shahjalal (R.H.) and Hazrat Shahparan (R.H.), attract people from diverse regions, while other mausoleums in the city possess exceptional natural beauty. The presence of mausoleums has elevated Sylhet's status and contributed to its distinctiveness as a sacred place in the hearts of its residents and the nation as a whole.

5. Conclusions

Sylhet, known as the city of "360 Olee," derives its name from the Arabic word "Olee," which refers to scholars, particularly Islamic scholars. The presence of these learned individuals in Sylhet has had a profound impact on the community and the city itself, leading to its transformation into a revered and holy place adorned with magnificent mausoleum architecture.

The mausoleums in Sylhet bear testament to the remarkable contributions and activities of these scholars, attracting visitors from far and wide. The city's skyline is graced with the striking beauty of these sacred structures, which have become iconic landmarks. The mausoleums serve not only as places of burial for these revered scholars but also as centers for spiritual contemplation, education, and prayer.

However, it is worth noting that certain aspects of the mausoleum cultures in Sylhet are sometimes viewed as incompatible with Islamic law due to the ways in which the authorities maintain them. There may be practices or rituals associated with the mausoleums that deviate from the strict interpretations of Islamic teachings. Despite this, the people of Sylhet, deeply rooted in their practicing culture, hold these mausoleums in high regard and continue to cherish and honor them within the confines of their religious beliefs.

The mausoleums have played a significant role in shaping the city's identity and vision. Their historical and spiritual significance, combined with the acceptance and reverence they receive from the people of the nation, have elevated Sylhet's status as a sacred city. They symbolize the rich heritage, religious devotion, and cultural traditions of the region, drawing pilgrims and tourists alike to experience the spiritual aura and architectural marvels that define Sylhet.

In conclusion, Sylhet's reputation as the city of "360 Olee" stems from the notable contributions of Islamic scholars and the mesmerizing mausoleum architecture that adorns its landscape. Despite potential conflicts with certain interpretations of Islamic law, the mausoleums continue to be cherished and respected by the people of Sylhet, helping to establish the city as a sacred destination.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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