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Original Article

Heritage Development Plan for Tiruchendur: A Framework for Delineating and Planning a Pilgrimage Heritage Town

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ABSTRACT

Tamil Nadu protects 38 heritage towns through a single height rule, and that rule alone cannot guide how these towns grow. This paper asks what a proper Heritage Development Plan (HDP) needs, using Tiruchendur, a coastal pilgrimage town with no HDP or master plan, as its test case. We review the principles and tools used in heritage planning, namely the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA), participatory planning and conservation-based zoning. We then compare how nine Indian towns and one Norwegian programme have drawn the boundary of their plan areas, since that choice shapes everything that follows. The comparison shows two workable patterns: planning the whole municipal area while analysing a 1 km core around the temple in detail, or planning only a 2.5 sq. km temple precinct. For Tiruchendur we recommend the first pattern, covering the municipality with a detailed study of a 3.24 sq. km core of 18 wards. Pilgrim arrivals rose from 20,44,949 in 2017 to 34,62,602 in 2023, an increase of about 69 per cent, and this pressure is the main reason the town needs a plan now. The paper closes with a phased framework for the data collection, analysis and proposals that the second stage of the work will carry out.

Keywords: heritage development plan, heritage town, area delineation, pilgrimage tourism, Historic Urban Landscape, Tiruchendur

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

A heritage town has to keep growing without losing what makes it worth protecting. A Heritage Development Plan (HDP) is the tool that guides this: it organises land use, buildings and infrastructure so that a town can meet present needs while keeping its character (Ministry of Urban Development [MoUD], 2015). Historic towns are under particular strain. They tend to have mixed land use, uneven development and congested movement networks, and spatial planning has to address these within a framework that respects local history and identity (Reinar et al., 2012).

In India, two initiatives bear most directly on heritage towns in Tamil Nadu. The first is the national Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), which identified 12 cities across the country for heritage-led planning, two of them in Tamil Nadu (MoUD, 2015). The second is a state decision. Through G.O. (Ms) No. 22, Municipal Administration and Water Supply Department, dated 30 January 1997, the Government of Tamil Nadu declared 38 towns as heritage towns. It limits buildings to 9 m in height within 1 km of each town's heritage site (DTCP, 1997). Plans have been prepared for only some of these towns, so many remain without any guiding framework (MoUD, 2015).

1.2 Why this study is needed

Tamil Nadu is known for its ancient temples, colonial buildings and traditional settlements, and all three are exposed to development pressure. The literature points to three recurring threats:

- **Rapid urbanisation.** Migration to urban areas leads to unplanned growth and encroachment on heritage sites (Reinar et al., 2012).
- **Commercialisation.** Economic pressure can lead to heritage buildings being altered or demolished for commercial use (Rahmafitria et al., 2020).
- **Low public awareness.** Where residents see little value in conservation, heritage is neglected and gradually damaged (Jayapal et al., 2015).

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Three responses are usually combined to counter these threats: government programmes such as HRIDAY and state funding for HDPs; the work of universities and non-governmental organisations in research, awareness and advocacy (MoUD, 2015); and community participation, which needs a plan that serves both economic and cultural goals (Jacobs, 1961).

1.3 Why Tiruchendur

Tiruchendur is a coastal pilgrimage town dedicated to Lord Murugan, and a place of great historical and cultural weight. Four facts make it a pressing case:

- It is covered by the 1997 heritage-town order, but no HDP or master plan has been prepared for it by the Directorate of Town and Country Planning (DTCP).
- It was upgraded from a town panchayat to a municipality of 24 sq. km in 2021.
- Tourist arrivals grew from 20,44,949 in 2017 to 34,62,602 in 2023, an increase of 69.32 per cent (Tamil Nadu Tourism Department).
- A plan can also help protect the temple's setting, slow environmental degradation, support traditional crafts and prepare for natural hazards (The Indian Express, 2022).

1.4 Significance

An HDP ties urban development to cultural and historical concerns so that new projects respect the existing architectural and social fabric (UNESCO, 2021). Clear guidelines on conserving key urban features limit the loss of historic character and community identity that modernisation can cause (INTACH, 2019). The same plan can improve residents' lives by dealing with land use, public services and environmental sustainability (ICOMOS, 2017). It also encourages stakeholders to build a shared vision, and supports mixed-use, low-rise, high-density development that revitalises historic areas without harming them (MoUD, 2015).

1.5 Aim, objectives and research questions

The aim of this study is to understand the procedural framework for preparing a Heritage Development Plan for a heritage town. Its objectives are to:

1. understand the concept and components of an HDP;
2. understand the scope and scale of plan that a heritage town needs;
3. identify the methods for delineating the planning area;
4. synthesise the analytical methods that measure the impact of urban development on heritage; and
5. formulate planning strategies for enhancing heritage towns.

The study is guided by six questions. What defines a heritage town's character, and what are the core principles and goals of an HDP? How does an HDP differ from a conventional development plan? Which legal and regulatory frameworks protect heritage sites? Which principles, concepts and tools support an HDP? Which methods best define and delineate the planning area? And what should the final output of an HDP be?

1.6 Scope and limitations

The study covers the spatial planning and development of the heritage town: an assessment of landmarks, current land use and zoning, heritage guidelines, traffic, environmental sustainability, tourism management and community engagement, leading to a phased implementation plan (MoUD, 2015). It does not examine cultural or religious practice.

2. Literature review: concepts, principles and planning models

2.1 Key concepts

Heritage covers the cultural, historical and natural assets passed from one generation to the next, in both tangible forms (monuments, sites, artefacts, landscapes) and intangible ones (traditions, oral history, music, dance, language, skills) (UNESCO, 2001). Cultural heritage refers to monuments, groups of buildings or sites with historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value (Town and Country Planning Organisation [TCPO], 2011).

Two definitions matter most for town-scale planning. *Urban heritage* is the built legacy of a town: protected and unprotected monuments, individual buildings and groups of buildings, public spaces, parks, and the street layout that defines recognisable neighbourhoods. It is tangible, but it draws its meaning from the

intangible heritage linked to it (TCPO, 2011). A *heritage town* is a place that is still lived and worked in, usually the older core around which newer parts of the settlement grew, and whose historical and architectural value makes it worth restoring (UNESCO, 2001).

Conservation of built heritage serves long-term economic, cultural and environmental interests. It does not mean freezing a building. The aim is to keep its original form and features while allowing necessary adaptation, using minimal intervention, suitable materials and reversible methods (Central Public Works Department [CPWD], 2013). A Heritage Management Plan, in turn, sets out the policies, objectives and actions for conserving and promoting heritage resources, including the immediate precincts of temples, monuments, mosques and churches (ICOMOS, n.d.).

2.2 Principles of heritage planning

The heritage-tourism planning guidance of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC, 2023) offers five principles that carry over well to a pilgrimage town:

1. **Focus on quality and authenticity.** Visitors look for authentic places with a high-quality experience.
2. **Preserve and protect resources.** Stewardship of historic, cultural and natural resources has to be balanced against tourism promotion.
3. **Make sites and programmes come alive.** Visitors want engaging, interactive experiences, built on research into a place's history and its key themes.
4. **Find the fit between community and tourism.** Tourism should benefit residents as well as visitors, which means respecting sensitive areas and carrying capacity.
5. **Collaborate.** Government agencies, non-profit organisations and businesses share the work of planning, delivery, management and promotion.

2.3 Participation

Heritage planning relies on three forms of participation, each building on Jacobs (1961). *Community-based planning* involves residents directly through workshops, focus groups and surveys, which surfaces local values and builds support. *Public consultation* uses formal channels such as public hearings and written submissions, which keeps the process transparent and accountable. *Partnership-based planning* brings government agencies, heritage organisations and community groups together to pool resources and expertise.

Valuing natural and cultural assets underpins all three. Natural assets provide ecosystem services and regulate climate, while cultural assets carry collective memory and tradition. Plans protect them through inventories, conservation plans, sustainable practices and engagement with local communities (National Institute of Urban Affairs [NIUA], 2022).

2.4 Planning models and tools

Heritage planning is multidisciplinary. It combines historic preservation, conservation management, heritage tourism, urban design and urban regeneration (MoUD, 2015; Rahmafitria et al., 2020). Four models are most useful for an HDP; Table 1 summarises them and the paragraphs below explain how each would be used.

Table 1: Models and Tools Used in Heritage Development Plans

Model or tool	Year	Focus	What it contributes	Source
Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach	2011	Integrating conservation with urban development	Identifies, assesses, conserves and manages historic urban landscapes within their wider urban setting	UNESCO
Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA)	2011	Assessing the effect of development	Systematic process to identify, evaluate and manage the effects of proposed development on heritage	ICOMOS
Participatory planning model	1961	Bottom-up planning with diverse communities	Engages stakeholders; guards against distrust and self-interest that can derail conservation and tourism planning	Jacobs
Conservation-based zoning	1969	Integrating natural systems into land-use planning	Special zones with tailored rules for land use, density, height and design: a strict core and a more flexible buffer	McHarg

Source: compiled by the author from UNESCO (2011), ICOMOS (2011), Jacobs (1961) and McHarg (1969).

Historic Urban Landscape. The HUL approach goes beyond individual monuments and historic districts to treat the whole urban environment, with its cultural, social and environmental dimensions, as the unit of management (UNESCO, 2011). Applied to a town, it supports four outcomes: preserving cultural identity and authenticity, economic growth through tourism and cultural industries, social cohesion through community involvement, and environmental sustainability through reuse of existing buildings and infrastructure (NIUA, 2022).

Heritage Impact Assessment. HIA was developed to judge how development affects the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of World Heritage properties (ICOMOS, 2011). It rates the value of the heritage asset from very high to negligible, rates the scale of change from none to major, and combines the two into a significance of effect that runs from neutral to very large. The process asks planners to agree the scope with stakeholders, prepare a scoping report covering conditions, alternatives and method, assess and categorise each impact, grade the heritage value, and set a timeline for consultation and reporting. Detailed study is then concentrated on the significant impacts.

Conservation-based zoning. Drawing on McHarg (1969), this approach lets topography, hydrology and ecology decide where development goes. Its main tool is overlay mapping: layers showing historical, ecological and cultural sensitivity are superimposed, and growth is steered toward the least sensitive land. The result is a strictly controlled core heritage zone, a more flexible but guided buffer zone, and green corridors that connect natural and built areas.

Participatory planning. Jacobs (1961) argued for bottom-up planning that draws on the knowledge of local people. In heritage work, the main risk is that self-interest and low trust between stakeholders weaken decisions, which is why the participation methods in Section 2.3 matter.

3. Legal and policy context

Height limits are the only planning control that most Indian states apply to heritage towns. Table 2 sets out the rule in six states. Tamil Nadu's is the strictest: 9 m within 1 km of the heritage site. Rajasthan applies 12 m but only within 500 m, while Karnataka, Gujarat, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh apply 12 to 15 m within 1 km. Karnataka also shows how a site-specific plan can tighten the general rule, since the Hampi Master Plan allows only 8 m within 300 m.

Table 2: Height Restrictions Near Heritage Sites in Six States

State	Instrument	Maximum height	Applies within
Tamil Nadu	G.O. (Ms) No. 22, MA&WS, 30.01.1997	9 m	1 km
Rajasthan	Rajasthan Development Control Regulations, 2017	12 m	500 m
Karnataka	Karnataka Municipalities Model Building Bye-law, 2017	15 m (Hampi Master Plan: 8 m)	1 km (Hampi: 300 m)
Kerala	Kerala Municipality Building Rules, 2019	12 m	1 km

State	Instrument	Maximum height	Applies within
Uttar Pradesh	Building Construction and Development Bye-laws, 2008 (amended 2011, 2016, 2018)	12 m	1 km
Gujarat	Gujarat Comprehensive Development Control Regulations, 2017	15 m	1 km

Source: compiled by the author from the instruments listed.

The pattern in Table 2 is the main finding of this section. Apart from height, none of the six states has adopted a planning intervention that shapes how a heritage town develops, such as zoning of the historic core, rules on land use or activities, or design guidance. A height cap protects the skyline, but it says nothing about traffic, tourist facilities, commercial pressure or the condition of the historic fabric. This gap is why heritage towns need a spatial framework of their own, and it explains why the Tamil Nadu government commissioned HDPs for towns such as Kanyakumari, Rameshwaram and Mamallapuram (Section 5).

METHODOLOGY

The work is planned in two phases. Phase I, reported here, builds the conceptual and procedural foundation. Phase II applies it to Tiruchendur and produces the plan itself.

4.1 Phase I: review and framework

Phase I follows eight steps in sequence:

1. Study the key definitions and concepts of heritage.
2. Establish why heritage towns need a dedicated development plan.
3. Review heritage-town case studies and identify the data a plan requires.
4. Review heritage policies, programmes and practice.
5. Understand how HDPs are prepared, using the case studies.
6. Compare the methods used to delineate the plan area, and choose a boundary for Tiruchendur.
7. Review the assessment models and methods available (Section 2.4).
8. Consolidate these into a plan-preparation framework for heritage towns.

Case studies were chosen because they are well-known heritage towns of broadly similar population and area, and most of them are coastal like Tiruchendur: Kanyakumari, Rameshwaram, Mamallapuram, Puri and Dwarka, plus a Norwegian programme. Madurai, Srirangam, Tiruttani and Kanchipuram were added because they show how temple precincts are planned in Tamil Nadu. Each offers a different lesson:

- Kanyakumari, Rameshwaram and Madurai have balanced religious tourism with conservation, and show how to manage pilgrim crowds and festivals.
- Srirangam shows how a temple town can build a local economy on its religious significance.
- Puri and Kanyakumari show sustainable tourism practice in coastal settings.
- Mamallapuram, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, shows visitor management, signage and interpretation, and how heritage can support local crafts and artisans.

4.2 Phase II: data and analysis

Phase II begins by setting the aim, objectives and scope, then delineating the area and preparing a base map. Primary and secondary data are collected on seven themes:

- the location and condition of heritage structures, and changes to them;
- land use, including trends and their effect on heritage structures, and local and allied economic activity such as shops and accommodation;
- demographic profile and projections;
- changes in the built-up area;
- physical and social infrastructure;
- connectivity, including bus routes and frequency, pedestrian provision and parking; and
- tourist flow, frequency and the tourism infrastructure it requires.

The analysis combines a SWOT assessment, identification of key issues, a demand-gap analysis, land-use suitability and resource mobilisation. It leads to the

Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) and heritage regulations, a proposed land-use plan and sector proposals, which together make up the HDP. The design draws on the Kanyakumari, Mamallapuram, Kanchipuram, Madurai and Puri plans.

5. Comparative review of area delineation

Where a plan draws its boundary decides what it can analyse and regulate, so we compared how ten towns and programmes have done it. UNESCO's World Heritage guidelines list the factors to weigh: historical and cultural significance (events, architectural styles, cultural practices, intangible heritage); physical boundaries (natural features, built form, street patterns and public space); visual coherence (skyline, landmarks, spatial relationships, materials); and functional considerations (land use, infrastructure, socio-economic conditions) (UNESCO, 2020). The NIUA compendium adds that good practice combines civic engagement, knowledge and planning, regulatory systems and financial tools (NIUA, 2022). Table 3 shows how the case studies applied these ideas.

Table 3: Delineation and Scale of Plan in the Case Studies

Town	Year	Area covered	Detailed focus area	Scale of plan	Main measures
Kanyakumari	2000	25.89 sq. km (whole town)	1 km around the temple (about 2.5 sq. km)	Heritage Development Plan	Beautification, open space, built form; 15.50 ha reserved for commercial use; water supply, drainage, public conveniences, parking. Coastal Regulation Zone applies
Rameshwaram	1999	53.00 sq. km (whole town)	1 km around the temple (about 2.5 sq. km)	Heritage Development Plan	Beautification, open space, built form; water supply, public conveniences, parking. Coastal Regulation Zone applies
Mamallapuram	1999	12.85 sq. km (whole town)	1 km around the temple (about 2.5 sq. km)	Heritage Development Plan	Beautification, open space, built form; water supply, public conveniences, parking
Tiruttani	1999	30.00 sq. km (whole town)	1 km around the temple (about 2.5 sq. km)	Heritage Development Plan	Same package as Mamallapuram
Kanchipuram	1998	36.14 sq. km (whole town)	One plot depth either side of the temple procession routes	Heritage Development Plan	Street-building relationship, conservative redevelopment, rejuvenation of temple tanks; public transport, alternative routes, pedestrian paths, parking
Madurai	2016	2.5 sq. km	Meenakshi temple and the outer veethis	Detailed Development Plan	Infrastructure gap assessment, identification of non-conforming activities, decongestion, relocation of activities, re-use of vacant space, transformation of the central business district
Srirangam	2024	2.5 sq. km	Ranganathaswamy temple and its seven prakarams	Detailed Development Plan	Special notified zone; facade control, conforming activities, priority for non-motorised transport
Puri	2016	26.00 sq. km (whole town)	500 m buffer around the Jagannath temple	Heritage Development Plan	Preserve traditional urban form; pedestrian access on Bada Danda; water, waste and street lighting upgrades

Town	Year	Area covered	Detailed focus area	Scale of plan	Main measures
Dwarka	2016	56.48 sq. km (whole town)	About 2.5 sq. km of temples, traditional markets and cultural paths	Heritage Development Plan	Heritage-focused land use, transport around temples, water and waste infrastructure, cultural tourism, coastal conservation
Norway	2011-12	Boundary around heritage sites (2.5 sq. km as recorded)	Protective boundary around each site	Building laws, regulations, planning acts	Condition assessment, energy standards, buffer zones, pilot renovation projects, life-cycle assessment

Source: compiled by the author from DTCP (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2024), Puri Municipality (2016), Urban Management Centre (2016), Reinar et al. (2012) and earlier academic reports (Charulatha, 1998; Karthikeyan, 1996; Vaasli, 2016).

Two patterns emerge. In the first, the plan covers the whole town and a smaller core is studied in detail. Kanyakumari, Rameshwaram, Mamallapuram and Tiruttani all take the 1 km radius from the 1997 order as that core; Puri uses a 500 m buffer; Dwarka defines about 2.5 sq. km by survey; and Kanchipuram follows its temple procession routes. In the second pattern, used in Madurai and Srirangam, the plan is a detailed development plan for the temple precinct alone, about 2.5 sq. km, with the rest of the city left to the wider master plan.

The whole-town pattern suits a place like Tiruchendur, which has no master plan of its own, because it can address land use, infrastructure and growth across the municipality. The precinct pattern assumes that a city-level plan already exists. The measures in the cases also line up closely. Most Tamil Nadu plans combine town beautification, open space, built-form control and basic infrastructure (water supply, public conveniences, parking). Madurai and Srirangam add decongestion and facade control, and Puri and Dwarka add pedestrian access and coastal protection, which are directly relevant to a coastal pilgrimage town.

6. Study area: Tiruchendur

6.1 Profile

Tiruchendur is a coastal temple town and one of the six abodes (*Arupadai Veedu*) of Lord Murugan, which makes it a major pilgrimage destination. It is one of the 38 heritage towns covered by the 1997 Tamil Nadu order, and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) has also recognised its heritage value. Although HRIDAY covered two Tamil Nadu cities, Tiruchendur was not one of them.

In 2021 the town was upgraded from a town panchayat to a municipality covering 24 sq. km. It has a population of 40,171, a density of about 1,700 persons per sq. km, and serves as the taluk headquarters with a District Munsiff Court and a Judicial Magistrate Court. Visitor numbers are far larger than the resident population: 20,44,949 tourists came in 2017 and 34,62,602 in 2023, a rise of 69.32 per cent (Tamil Nadu Tourism Department; Thoothukudi District Administration, n.d.). That growth increases the load on roads, parking, water, sanitation and the coastline, yet DTCP has prepared neither an HDP nor a master plan for the town.

6.2 Investment already under way

Public money is now flowing into the temple area, which makes a guiding plan more urgent. The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister laid the foundation stone for a Rs 300 crore project at the temple, the largest in its history. Rs 200 crore comes as a donation from Vamasundari Investment Private Limited and Rs 100 crore from the temple's own funds. The works include better queue systems, waiting areas, pathways and medical facilities; a pilgrims' dormitory, washing ghat, bus stand, marriage halls and a facility for sacred offerings; fire prevention, a control room and security systems; and a protective wall against coastal erosion (Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, n.d.).

The first phase, costing Rs 68.36 crore, has already opened. It includes 100 air-conditioned double rooms, dormitory blocks, family cottages and parking. Without an area-wide plan, projects like these are designed one by one and their combined effect on traffic, land use and the temple's setting goes unexamined.

6.3 Delineation of the plan area

Drawing on Section 5, we propose a two-level boundary for Tiruchendur:

1. **Planning area:** the whole municipality, about 24 sq. km, because no master plan exists and growth beyond the temple precinct needs guidance.
2. **Detailed study area:** a core of 18 municipal wards covering 3.24 sq. km around the temple, which follows the 1 km radius set in the 1997 order and matches the practice at Kanyakumari, Rameshwaram, Mamallapuram and Tiruttani.

The whole-town level lets the plan deal with land use, infrastructure and growth. The core level supports a close look at heritage structures, activities, movement and visitor pressure at the scale where heritage and daily life meet.

DISCUSSION

7.1 What the review shows

Three findings stand out. First, the legal protection that heritage towns now have is thin. A height cap is the only common control (Table 2), and it leaves traffic, land use, visitor facilities and the historic fabric unmanaged. Second, the tools reviewed fit together as stages of one process rather than as alternatives. HUL gives the outlook, overlay mapping and conservation-based zoning give the spatial structure of a strict core and a guided buffer, HIA tests individual proposals, and participation keeps the plan accountable to residents (Table 1). Third, the case studies show that the choice of boundary is a real planning decision with two workable answers (Table 3), and the right one depends on whether a city-level plan already exists.

Tiruchendur has the features that call for a whole-town plan with a detailed core: a coastal setting, a very large pilgrim flow, a recently enlarged municipal area and no master plan. The scale of current temple investment adds to the case, since each new facility changes where people gather and how traffic moves.

7.2 Expected outcomes

Phase I should leave the study with a clear understanding of the components of an HDP and how the concept has developed in India through its policies and action plans. It should also give a plan-preparation process for heritage towns, the assessment methods suited to heritage-centred development, methods for estimating tourist demand against infrastructure supply, and a justified study area for Tiruchendur.

Phase II is expected to deliver:

- a map of the existing situation by sector within the study area;
- projections of tourist footfall and population;
- an assessment of how heritage structures are affected and what can be done to protect them;
- an analysis of how tourism changes land use and urban growth;
- an estimate of infrastructure needs, with proposals; and
- a strategic spatial plan that regulates development in the historic town.

7.3 Limitations

This paper is a review and framework. It rests on secondary sources and on published plans for other towns, and it has not yet tested its recommendations with field data from Tiruchendur. Some case-study details come from older academic reports rather than the plans themselves. The study also deals only with spatial planning and does not examine cultural or religious practice, so the plan will need to be read alongside the temple administration's own decisions on ritual and festival matters.

CONCLUSION

Heritage towns in Tamil Nadu are protected by a height limit but not guided by a plan. Tiruchendur shows the cost of that gap: a fast-growing pilgrim population, large temple projects and a coastal setting, with no HDP or master plan to coordinate them. This paper has set out the concepts, principles and tools needed to prepare one, compared how other towns have drawn their boundaries, and proposed a two-level area for Tiruchendur: the full municipality of about 24 sq. km and a detailed core of 3.24 sq. km. The next stage will collect and analyse data on heritage structures, land use, population, infrastructure, movement and tourism, and turn the results into a spatial plan that lets Tiruchendur grow while keeping its heritage intact.

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