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Conservation Engineering in Urban India: Addressing Policy Gaps in Historic Core Management

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Abstract: ***India's historic urban cores—dense, culturally rich zones with layered histories—are increasingly under threat from unregulated urban development, inadequate legal protections, and fragmented governance structures. This paper investigates the disconnect between conservation policies and on-ground realities in preserving heritage precincts within growing Indian cities. Drawing from secondary data and urban planning literature, the study identifies key shortcomings in institutional frameworks, assesses challenges posed by commercialization and infrastructural pressure, and compares Indian conservation policies with international best practices like UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL). The paper concludes with strategic recommendations to reform planning regulations, promote participatory conservation, and reposition heritage as an integral part of sustainable urban development.***

Keywords: Heritage conservation, historic urban cores, policy gaps, urban India, UNESCO HUL

I. INTRODUCTION

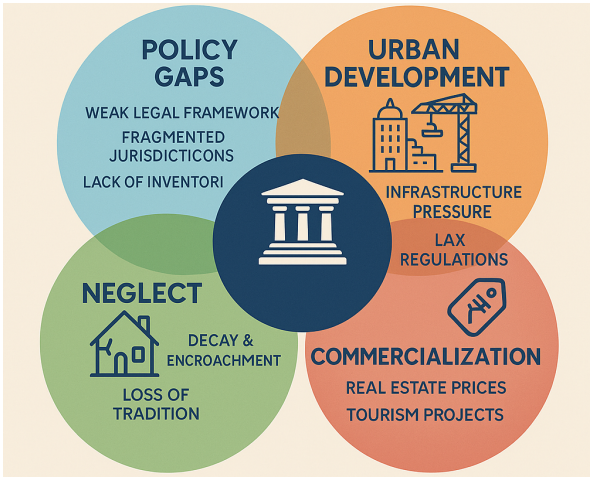


Fig. 1: Layered Challenges in Conserving Historic Urban Cores in India

India's cities are cultural palimpsests—layers of dynastic, colonial, and modern history embedded within dense urban cores. From the walled precincts of Old Delhi to the pink facades of Jaipur, these areas are living testaments to architectural, social, and spiritual heritage. Yet, as Indian cities expand rapidly, the very fabric of these historic cores is unraveling.

The challenge lies not in a lack of awareness but in the fragmentation of policy frameworks, jurisdictional overlaps, and absence of enforceable conservation regulations at the local level. While national policies recognize the need for heritage conservation, urban development authorities often prioritize short-term economic goals over long-term cultural sustainability.

This paper investigates the current status of policy implementation for the conservation of historic urban areas in India, highlights gaps in institutional governance, and proposes a framework for aligning urban development with heritage protection.

II. CURRENT CONSERVATION POLICY FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

India's heritage conservation efforts are regulated by a complex blend of central laws, state rules, and municipal building regulations, often overlapping and occasionally contradictory.

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The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (AMASR Act), 1958 protects monuments of national importance under the jurisdiction of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). However, this coverage is limited to a small subset of nationally recognized structures.

At the state level, several states have their own archaeological departments and heritage acts (such as Maharashtra's Heritage Regulations for Greater Bombay, 1995). But these are not uniformly adopted, and enforcement remains weak. Moreover, municipal development control rules (DCRs) often omit heritage precincts or apply standard zoning norms unsuited for conservation-sensitive areas.

Programs like HRIDAY and the Smart Cities Mission do attempt to integrate heritage into urban planning, but their execution is largely aesthetic—focused on façade improvement and tourism infrastructure. Additionally, the 74th Constitutional Amendment mandates decentralized urban governance, but heritage management has not been adequately devolved to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), leaving a vacuum between policy intent and implementation.

III. CASE STUDIES: CHALLENGES IN THREE HISTORIC URBAN CORES

A. Bhopal – The Forgotten Lakefront Heritage

Fig. 4: Revived Stepwell in Hyderabad

Bhopal's historic core near the Upper Lake features mosques, palaces, and bazaars built during the Nawabi era. However, poor zoning and commercial pressures have fragmented its architectural integrity. The area is now marked by traffic congestion, unregulated signage, and neglected monuments. Though Bhopal was included in the HRIDAY scheme, tangible conservation efforts remain limited. There is little coordination between municipal bodies, tourism departments, and ASI. Moreover, gentrification and rising property values are displacing long-time residents and craftsmen. A sensitive lakefront conservation plan, focused on pedestrianization and mixed-use revitalization, is needed.

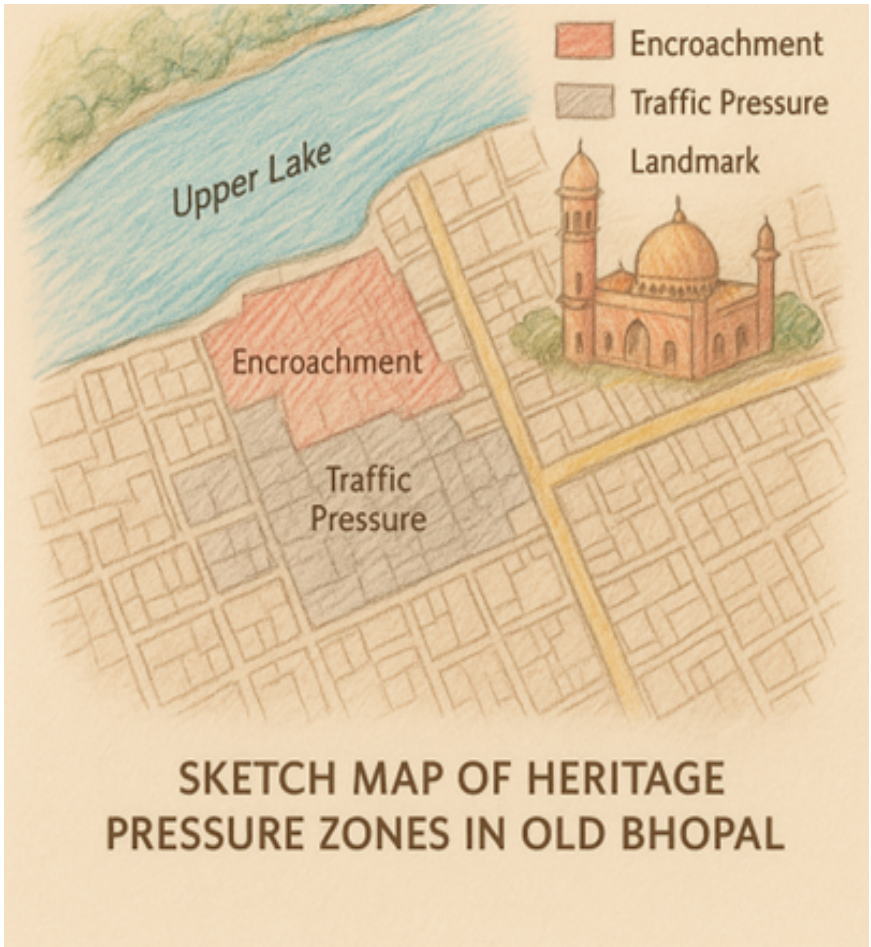


Fig. 2: Heritage Pressure Zones in Old Bhopal

B. Jaipur – The Pink City Under Pressure

Jaipur's iconic pink façades and gridiron streets are globally recognized. However, rapid commercialization has led to the conversion of traditional havelis into hotels and shops. Many are structurally altered or illegally expanded. Encroachments in the Walled City and pressure from tourist infrastructure threaten its heritage value.

Despite being a UNESCO World Heritage City, Jaipur lacks a strong enforcement mechanism for heritage byelaws. There is an urgent need for participatory conservation models and incentives for adaptive reuse of private heritage properties.

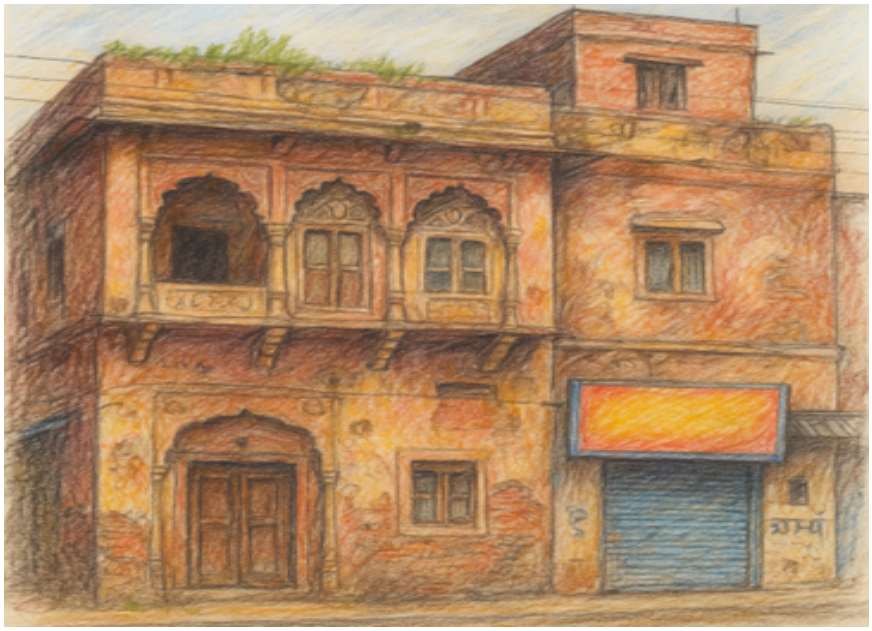


Fig. 3: Disappearing Haveli in Jaipur

C. Hyderabad – Rapid Growth and Forgotten Wells

Hyderabad's historic water structures, such as stepwells and tanks, are a critical part of its built heritage. However, many have been encroached upon or filled up. The Golconda and Charminar areas face illegal construction, overhead wiring, and vehicular chaos. Though some stepwells have recently been revived by NGOs and architects, a city-level framework for identifying, protecting, and reusing these assets is missing. The state must promote heritage-sensitive zoning and integrate these assets into stormwater and public space strategies.

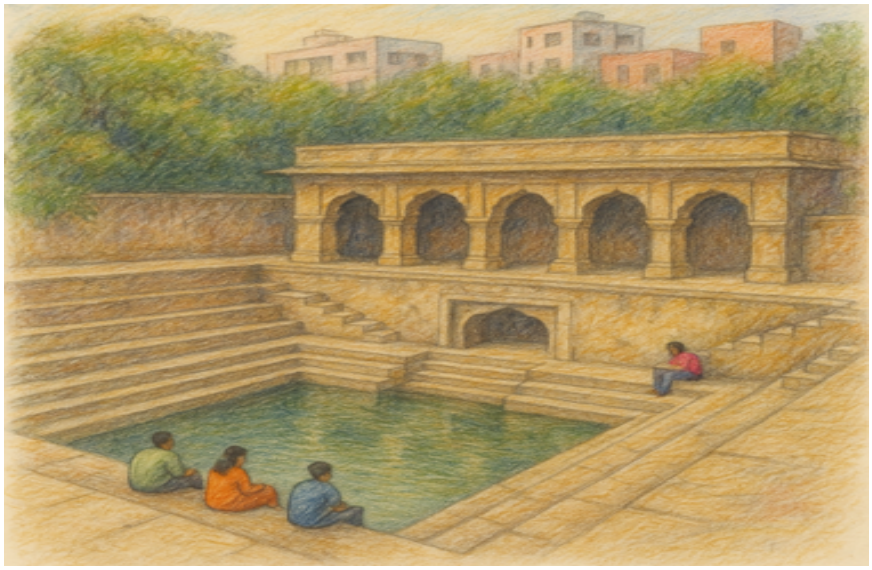


Fig. 4: Revived Stepwell in Hyderabad

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IV. GLOBAL PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM INTERNATIONAL MODELS

International conservation efforts offer valuable lessons. UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) framework promotes integrating heritage with sustainability and urban planning. In cities like Barcelona, heritage precincts are protected using contextual zoning and transfer of development rights (TDRs). Kyoto enforces strict skyline limits and material regulations. In contrast, Indian cities lack integrated, enforceable frameworks for urban heritage.

Instead of monument-centric conservation, the focus should shift to heritage precincts, layered landscapes, and vernacular typologies.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Heritage Policies – India vs Global Examples

Parameter	Indian Cities	Global Examples
Legal Framework	Fragmented across national/state laws	Unified and enforceable (e.g., HUL)
Zoning Regulations	Often generic; rarely heritage-specific	Detailed heritage overlay zones
Incentives for Conservation	Minimal or unclear	Strong TDRs, tax rebates
Community Participation	Limited and inconsistent	Institutionalized stakeholder models
Integration with Urban Planning	Weak and post-facto	Embedded in planning process

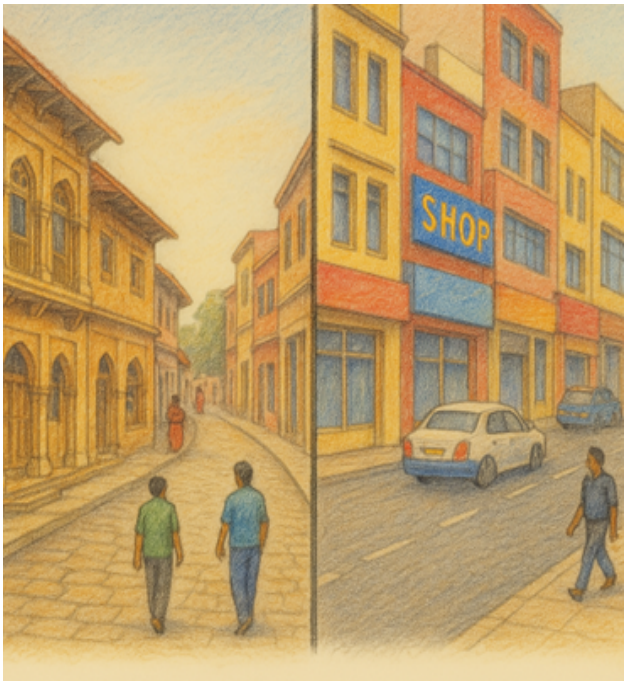


Fig. 5: Traditional vs Modern Streetscape – A Visual Comparison

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To preserve India's historic cores, the following reforms are needed:

- Enact a unified Urban Heritage Conservation Act.
- Make local heritage listing and digital inventories mandatory.
- Introduce conservation zoning with incentives like TDR and tax rebates.
- Institutionalize Heritage Cells in ULBs.
- Promote participatory conservation with civil society and residents.

These steps can bridge policy intent and on-ground outcomes.

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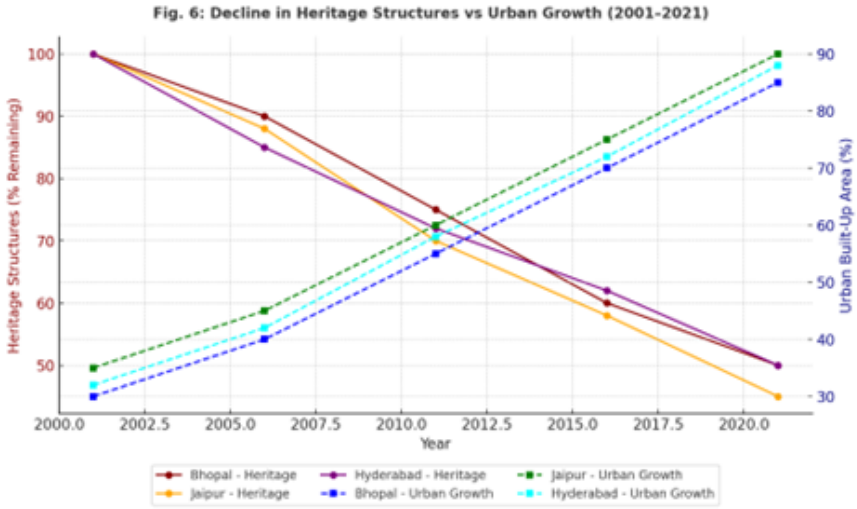


Fig. 6: Decline in Heritage Structures vs Urban Growth (2001–2021)

VI. CONCLUSION

Historic urban cores represent the identity, resilience, and spirit of Indian cities. Their survival depends not just on restoration but on systemic reforms in planning, policy, and governance. As we move toward Viksit Bharat 2047, heritage must be seen not as a hindrance but a cornerstone of sustainable urbanism.

This study urges architects, planners, and policymakers to integrate heritage into the core of city development, with regulatory clarity, local empowerment, and public engagement. A nation that forgets its roots risks losing its future.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

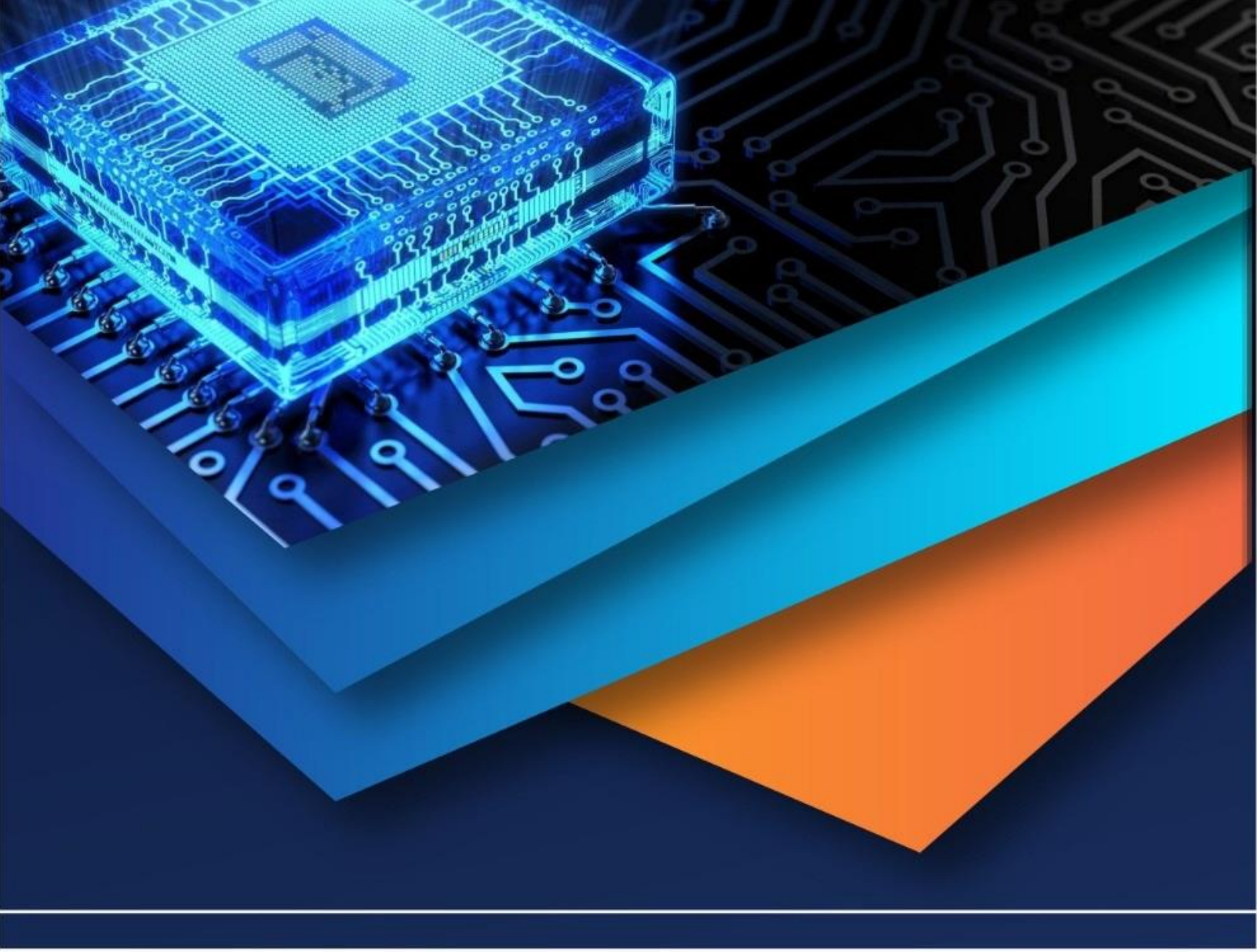
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

- No funding or financial support was received.
- No conflicts of interest exist.
- No ethical approval was required.
- All data used are secondary and cited appropriately.

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