

## Sustainable Settlement And Communities (UNSDG 11) -Localization in India's Religious Cities

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**How to cite this article:** Naumi Garg, Atul Kumar Singla, Shilpa Jain (2024) Sustainable Settlement And Communities (UNSDG 11) -Localization in India's Religious Cities. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 8583-8594.

### Abstract

India, the world's most populated country, has **Urban population** (% of total **population**) as 36.36 % in 2023, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, with 508 million people living in cities and towns in 2024. Alarmed global nations agreed to prioritize the much-needed sustainable development guidelines for future development. As a result, in 2012 the process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was launched at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro. To create a sustainable, liveable, and resilient future, the United Nations General Assembly announced seventeen SDGs in September 2015 to be achieved by 2030. Out of the 17 goals, the paper focuses on SDG 11 i.e., sustainable cities and communities. Among all the cities in India, religious heritage cities are witnessing huge amount of development. In light of globalisation and urbanisation, all Indian religious heritage cities have persistent issues with contemporary urban infrastructure for future development, based on environmental, cultural, economic, and social sustainability pillars. The research is carried out to understand the extent of SDG 11 localization in India concerning religious cities, identify the issues related to the implementation of the targets, and indicators, and analyse the present conditions. Urbanization is a threat on a global scale, but historic religious cities and towns with significant heritage value raise the stakes even higher. Along with primary surveys and interviews government reports, and papers have been referred to identify the gaps in the localization of SDG 11 and the recommendations suggested.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Localization, NITI Aayog, Religious Cities, Urbanization

### Introduction

India is passing through the "Decade of Action" alongside the rest of the globe. Nations are speeding up the creation and execution of sustainable strategies for the world's largest problems, from poverty and gender inequality to the impact of climate change, with fewer than eight years remaining to fulfil the Global Goals. The adoption, implementation, and oversight of the Global Goals at the national, sub-national, and local levels have become a top priority for all significant development players since the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through collaborations with the corporate sector, civic society, and other stakeholders, this agreement is being turned into targeted initiatives at all tiers of the government. In the past six years, India has led an array of SDG efforts. India was at the forefront of accepting adopting and

championing the SDG framework when the world realized the need for sustainable development. Following the COVID-19 global pandemic and our attempts to set a new development trajectory for the post-pandemic future, India's commitment to the SDGs has only become stronger. India's progress may be seen in the improvements in poverty reduction, agricultural output, illness eradication, mass education, industrial activity, innovation, and urban growth. The ambitious SDG11 agenda aims to create more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cities. The independent urban objective has thrust urbanization to the fore of policy considerations. The goal highlights that cities have an explicit role to play in enabling sustainable development writes Hitesh Vaidya, Director of the National Institute of Urban Affairs in his paper in 2022. Ten specific targets and 15 specific indicators are included in SDG11, which is to "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable". These include a wide range of topics, such as access to transit networks (target 11.2), social inclusion (target 11.3), and preservation of the world's natural and cultural assets (target 11.4). This spectrum recognizes the variety of habitations and civilizations. It also emphasizes the necessity to reinterpret and adapt the SDG framework to a city's unique local circumstances. (Adamec et al., n.d.). The study of religious cities and their historical sites enables us to think through the consequences of how such priceless cultural remnants are handled and frequently kept away to 'guard' them from environmental harm. Pilgrimage is an act of enlightenment (Manoj et al., n.d.). Eventization of faith considers the effects of customary temple-led pilgrimages to significant religious sites. For instance, pilgrimages to the Holy Land may affect the local temple communities and devotees. Such challenges of religious cities can be resolved through the application of SDG 11, as it provides targets and indicators for transport systems, protection of natural and cultural heritage, social inclusiveness, etc. The most significant religious cities in India for their recent development works and the model of religious cities are as per the charts below.

Chart  
1:

|          |                                |
|----------|--------------------------------|
| Mathura  | Yamuna, Krishna's birthplace.  |
| Madurai  | Historic Meenakshi temple      |
| Puri     | Jagannath Temple               |
| Varanasi | Ganga, Kashi Vishvanath temple |
| Dwarka   | Dwarkadhish temple             |

Religious significance of the cities, Source: Author

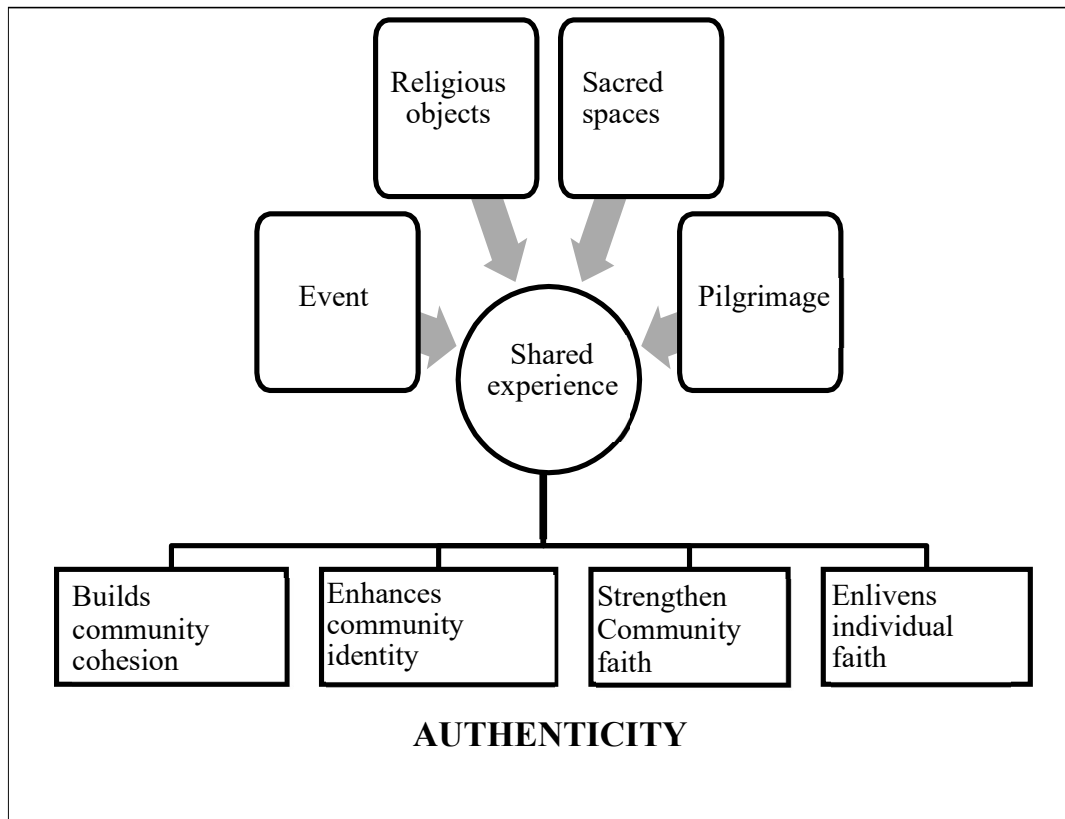


Chart 2: Religious cities model (Dowson,2020)

## Methodology

### United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs)

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a group of seventeen worldwide objectives that were established by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 to eradicate poverty, protect the environment, and ensure peace and prosperity for everyone. The COVID pandemic has slowed down development globally, making it harder to achieve the SDGs. The fact that the pandemic's impacts are anticipated to last for years is also well acknowledged. According to an estimate made by Nationally Determined Contributions, a body established after the Paris Agreement of 2015 to monitor the efforts of signatory countries towards reducing national emissions and adapting to climate change, India alone needs 170 billion dollars per year from 2015 to 2030 to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The UN SDG indicators and Indian SDG indicators differ in a number of ways, including: i) The UN SDG indicators do not include the slum population or net density, while the Indian SDG indicators similarly don't include; the amount of pollutants and fine particulate matter, the percentage of victims of physical or sexual harassment, the percentage of local governments that adopt and implement local disaster risk reduction strategies that are in line with national disaster risk reduction strategies, and the percentage of financial support to the least developed countries that is allocated to the construction and retrofitting of sustainable, resilient, and resource-efficient buildings using local materials.

### Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) India

India has 17% of the world's population, which makes it essential for accomplishing global goals. Given the scope of the population and the wide range of geographic, demographic, and social imbalances, there have been several obstacles since the SDGs were introduced. Despite this, India launched the SDG India Index

2018 first in the world. As a framework for guiding development actions at the national and sub-national levels, the SDGs have been accepted by the government. HRIDAY, AMRUT, and PRASHAD are merely a few examples of government policies that are closely aligned to the SDG priorities and enable accelerated progress towards meeting the Global Goals on schedule. As the official and major tool for SDG monitoring at the national and sub-national levels on the progress monitoring front, the NITI Aayog-created SDG India Index & Dashboard has assumed the lead position. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is being calculated at the federal, state, and local levels by NITI Aayog, which has also produced actionable insights for accelerating improvements in health, education, and living standards. The Index was updated in 2019 and made more precise than it was before. The Index was crucial in inspiring the states and union territories to act in support of the SDGs. It aided in raising awareness of the SDGs among the public, the press, academics, and civil society. To demonstrate good SDG implementation, several states have started rating districts. The combined effort of the central and state governments has led to a growth-driven atmosphere among the public. Nodal bodies for SDGs institutionalizing at national and sub-national levels states as at national level-for NITI Aayog:- targets mapping to programmes, coordination with union ministries, coordination with state planning departments and supporting states in developing monitoring framework whereas at sub-national level- planning department:- SDG Vision roadmap for a state, mapping targets- departments, Coordinating with line departments/ districts, Formation of task groups, aligning budget allocation with SDG priorities and capacity building of state and local officials (NITI Aayog, 2021). Recently during the G20 summit that was organized in New Delhi, India; the leaders have announced to take collective action to accelerate the progress on meeting SDGs. According to their declaration, there is 12% progress in the achievement of global goals. Their action plans include the mobilization of affordable, adequate, and accessible financing from all sources to support developing nations in their domestic efforts to address bottlenecks for implementing the agenda and to scale up sustainable finance (Jha, 2023). From Make in India to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, from the Smart Cities Mission to the SDGs, from affordable housing to green energy, and many other initiatives, inciting competition among the stakeholders has resulted in rapid and high-quality development. Under the SDG 11 localization, cases of five Indian religious cities are considered for the study of the impact and progress of the SDGs implementation i.e., Mathura-Vrindavan, Madurai, Puri, Dwarka, and Varanasi.



Chart 3: Institutional structure and implementation of SDG in India (Khalid & Sharma, 2018)

### Religious cities

A city that is particularly revered by followers of a specific religion, such as Varanasi for Hindus, Mecca and Medina for Muslims, and Jerusalem for Jews and Christians is known as a religious city. Several holy and spiritual locations are a representation of the various world cultures and customs. A religious link may be found in around 20% of the sites that have been included in the World Heritage List. Religious cities in India carry a great value of significance among the people. There are various religious heritage cities in India,

including Char-dhams, 12 Jyotirlingas and 51 Shakti Piths of Hindu; Mecca/ Masjid / Dargahs in Ajmer, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Srinagar, Aurangabad, etc in Muslims; Gurudwara of Amritsar, Buddhist monastery in Sikkim, Ladakh and Tawang among others.

**Mathura-Vrindavan:** Mathura-Vrindavan holds a sacred religious significance in Indian and international pilgrimage circles. Mathura receives a lot of tourists from all over the world which causes physical and infrastructural concerns regarding the city. In 2017 there were more than 7 million tourist arrivals in Mathura, which decreased in 2020 due to the pandemic to around 1 million and rose after that to 8 million in 2022 (Singh & Rana, 2023). Vrindavan is a small town with 5000 temples, 80 miles SE of Delhi on the banks of the sacred river Yamuna, also known as the “Forest of Devotion”. With the active participation of stakeholders in the SDGs and future development, the Government of India supports inclusive heritage sustainable development of historic cities under the umbrella of holistic development (Kumar & Singh, 2017). Various schemes have been launched by the government for the gradation, cleaning, and maintenance of such heritage sites. In the given figure 2 below, a few images of works done under the government schemes are shown, where one shows the Krishna Janmbhoomi precinct area and the other is multilevel parking for visitors in Vrindavan.



Figure 1: Works done in Mathura-Vrindavan a) Krishna Janmbhoomi area b) Multilevel parking at Vrindavan. Source: (Mathura HRIDAY Works @ [www.dpc.co.in](http://www.dpc.co.in), 2023), Source: Author

**Puri:** A coastal City in the state of Orissa is also one of the ‘Char Dhams’. It is the Land of Jagannath, a holy city famous as a sacred Hindu religious location. There are five other significant Shiva temples in Puri in addition to the major Lord Jagannath Temple. The Puri master plan recognizes the region's tourist potential and classifies it as a zone with potential for development in the leisure and tourism industries. (Rajkot Urban Development Authority, 2012) Puri Town is under pressure to grow, yet there aren't enough good open areas and there's a land shortage. It is always being pressured to develop commercially, residentially, and recreationally. The city hosts many national and international floating populations of around 1 lakh per day. Despite being a popular tourist site, it lacks the infrastructure needed to support a sizeable floating population all year round. HRIDAY, AMRUT and state scheme ABHADA are working on the religious development works for the city. The city is divided into three zones under HRIDAY i.e. Shankh Kshetra Heritage Zone, River Musa Environmental Heritage Zone, and Balukhanda Recreational Zone (Municipality, 2019).



Figure 2: Works done in Puri city: a) Jagannath temple (Sankhshetra) street development b) renovated parks; Source: Author

**Madurai:** A historic city in Tamil Nadu, the city lies on the south bank of river Vaigai. It is well-known for

the enormous Meenakshi temple, one of India's historic temple cities that has been around for two millennia. In terms of size and population, it ranks third in the state and is the second-largest city overall. Sustainable development faces significant obstacles because of urban shrinkage. (Kundu et al., 2019)



Figure 3: Works done in Madurai city- a) Kunnathur Chatram, b) Vaigai Riverfront Development; Source: Author



Figure 4: Works done in Varanasi city a) zone-wise development, b) development of heritagewalk around Kabirchaura and Piplani, Source: Author

**Varanasi:** Varanasi, historically known as Benares, Banaras, or Kashi, is a city in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It is one of the seven holy towns in Hinduism and is situated on the left bank of the Ganges (Ganga) River. With kilometres of ghats, or steps, for religious bathing, Varanasi boasts the best riverfront in all of India. A variety of shrines, temples, and palaces rise layer upon tier from the water's edge. (Singh & Rana, 2023) The modern outer suburbs are larger and more thoughtfully planned than the older inner-city streets, which are congested and impossible for motor vehicles to navigate. In Figure 5 below, the first image shows the proposed zone-wise development of the heritage sites, and the other image is of the development of a heritage walk around Kabirchaura and Piplani.

**Dwarka:** Ancient Indian culture and mythology had a strong influence on the city of Dwarka. Hinduism places a great deal of religious and historical significance on Dwarka as a major pilgrimage site. It is one of the important Dhams in each of the four Char Dhams. It is being in Shri Krishna's chosen residence and main city after he abandoned Mathura..



Figure 5: Works done in Dwarka city a) heritage structures and Seaside development. Source: Author

### Classification of cities

There are various organizations and institutes of national and international significance that provide classification of cities based on certain factors such as population, area, density, etc. There are three authorities/organizations which provide city classification, and they are the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Census of India, and the Urban and Regional Development, Planning, Formulation and Implementation (URDPFI) Guidelines 2014. RBI classifies cities as tier I to tier VI based on the existing population and URDPFI guidelines 2014 categorizes cities into small, medium, large, metropolitan, and megalopolis. Similarly, the Census of India 2011 classifies the cities/towns as class I to class VI based on their population. The following table shows the classes of the selected religious cities with their population.

**Table 1: Classification of religious cities**

| Religious Cities  | Population (2011)      | Class category |
|-------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Mathura-Vrindavan | 412,914 (349909+63005) | Class I city   |
| Madurai           | 1,470,755              | Class I city   |
| Puri              | 200,564                | Class I city   |
| Varanasi          | 1,198,491              | Class I city   |
| Dwarka            | 38,873                 | Class III city |

Source: Author, (114-Mathura @ Wwww.Census2011.Co.In, 2022)

### Government of India Initiatives

Natural, historic, and cultural resources are abundant and diverse in India. However, it has not yet made the best use of these resources. Historically, when attempts have been made to preserve ancient and cultural resources in Indian cities and towns, the needs and aspirations of the surrounding communities as well as the key issues relating to urban development, such as the economy, urban planning, livelihoods, service delivery, utility and infrastructure distribution in the area, have frequently been disregarded. The Government of India (GOI) has taken certain initiatives to resolve the existing issues with the religious and heritage cities of the country, a few of them are -

#### HRIDAY-

Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY): The heritage development of a city involves the creation and preservation of a wide range of city development, including its planning, its fundamental services, the quality of life for its residents, its economy and way of life, cleanliness, security, the revitalization of its soul, and the outward expression of its personality (*Index @ Wwww.Hridayindia.In, 2023*). A systematic strategy is required to unlock the endless potential inherent in the tourist and heritage sector, releasing the power of skilled craftsmen, and traditional economy, to make these cities dynamic, and competitive, and solve some of the listed difficulties. This will also make it possible to seamlessly integrate the contemporary idea of local economic growth using locally accessible information, resources, and skills (Ministry of Urban Development, 2015). The scheme includes twelve cities of the country such as Varanasi, Mathura-Vrindavan, Puri, Ajmer, Amritsar, Dwarka, Amravati, Warangal, Velakanni, Gaya, Badami and Kanchipuram (SOLANKI, 2020). Under HRIDAY, several works are being conducted in all the cities mentioned while in Puri it couldn't be executed successfully.

#### **AMRUT -**

Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) the scheme is launched as an updated version of JNNURM. Some of the work fields of AMRUT are Water Supply, Sewerage, Storm Water Drainage, Urban Transport management motorized transport, green space /Parks, and Simplification of building by-laws. The methodology of working includes Central Monitoring systems for: - Sewerage levels, Water meters, billing systems, and Water quality. Pollution Global System for Mobile. Smart Home energy network system.

#### **PRASHAD -**

Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual and Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD): The scheme works on the following aspects: - Perspective - Culture, Cultural Heritage, and Inclusive Heritage Development, Sustainability, Social: -Environment, Economic, and Culture.

#### **SMART CITY MISSION-**

SCM - The scheme considers 100 cities for overall development. It includes Housing and inclusiveness as drivers for development. The scheme works in conveyance with AMRUT, HRIDAY. SCM includes works underwater supply, Sanitation, Waste management, urban mobility, Sustainable environment, Robust IT connectivity, and digitalization and other schemes such as ABADHA for Puri: Augmentation of Basic Amenities and Development of Heritage and Architecture (ABADHA) scheme, a state scheme, to cultivate the Jagannath Temple of Puri into a world-famous heritage city (Launched in 2017). It aims to provide better and affordable facilities for pilgrims and tourists. Most of the projects are worked under this scheme; 2021-22 saw a budget of 1087 crores. Proposed works under the scheme include Puri Heritage Corridor Project: Shree Jagannath Heritage Corridor (SJHC), Puri Lake development project, up-gradation of Raghunandan Library, Matha development initiatives, Musa River revival plan, Jagannath Ballad Pilgrim Center, acharya Harihar square development, Atharnala heritage development, housing projects, Shree Setu plans, etc. (Municipality, 2023.).

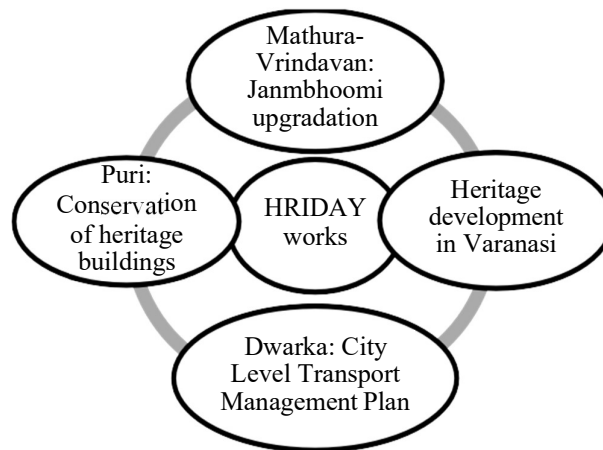


Chart 4: Works under HRIDAY in the major religious cities of India

#### **Result and Discussion**

The new era of urbanization has led to the destruction and chaos of eco-sensitive, religious, and traditional value-based cities. Local communities seem to neglect their traditional heritage and move toward non-traditional ways of living and making reforms as per their convenience resulting in crisis and misery (Hitesh Vaidya, 2022). Lately, India has used a top-down approach to designing, implementing, and monitoring SDG 11, engaging both national and state governments. This endeavour has not percolated to the city level, particularly in medium and small towns. The political economics of urban growth is already biased towards

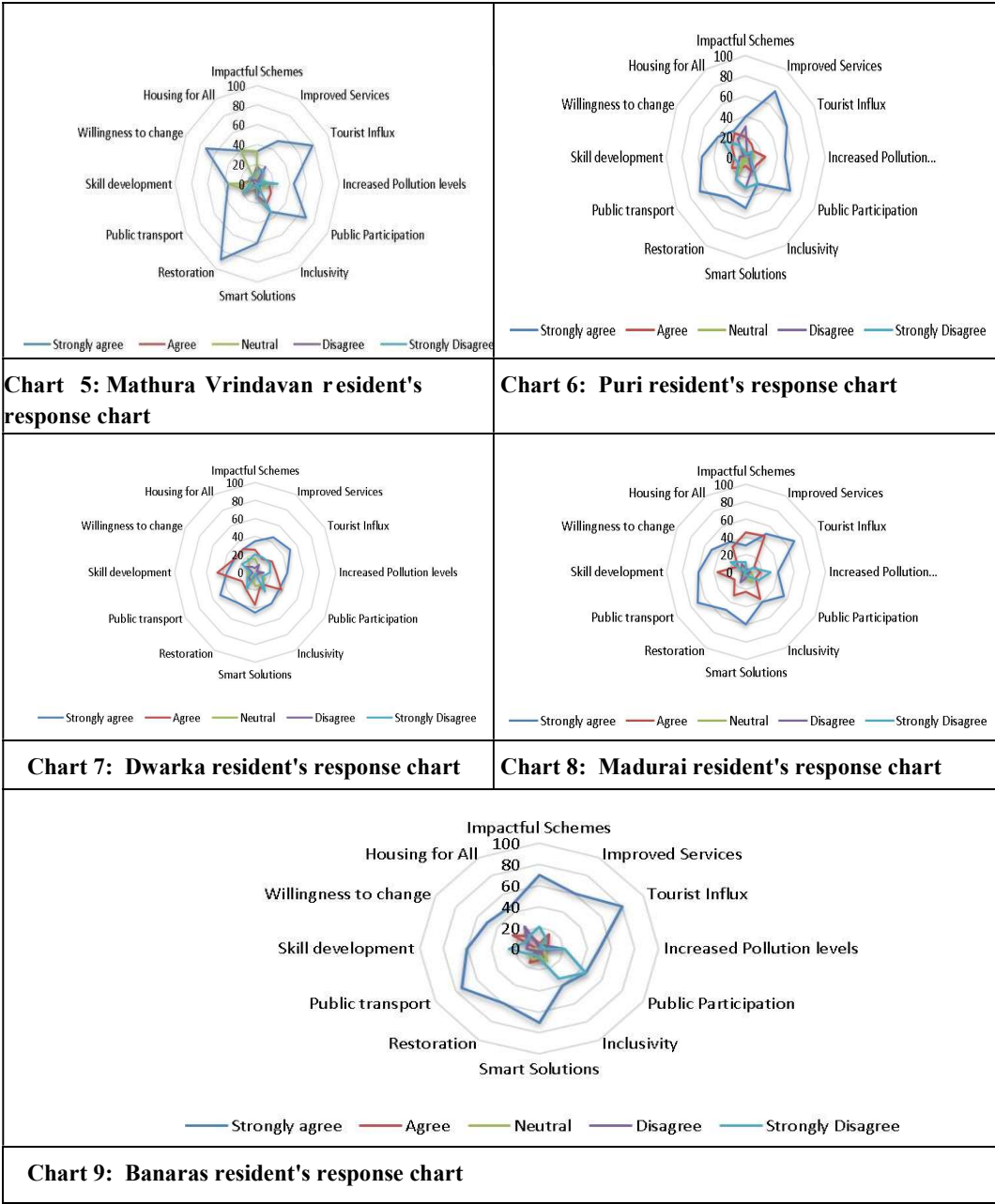
metropolitan cities and large urban centres, and a top-down strategy would result in uneven development. To accomplish SDG 11, a bottom-up strategy is necessary. The table below represents the issues in achieving the targets of SDG 11 for the selected religious cities.

**Table 2: Religious Cities- Existing issues**

| TARGET GOALS BY 2030                                     | MATHURA VRINDAVAN                                                   | MADURAI                                                                  | PURI                                                                       | VARANASI                                                                                                 | DWARKA                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inclusivity and participatory planning                   | Poor participation and inclusivity.                                 | Present, pedestrian-friendly streets, parks, public facilities.          | Partially present, Poor waste disposal.                                    | Very poor, demolition of heritage structures.                                                            | Considered to an extent.                                                               |
| Heritage conservation                                    | Partially done, polluted river water of Yamuna, nowaste management. | Works under progress for heritage, poor implementation.                  | Tanks and beaches are protected but pollution and lack of awareness exist. | Negligence. 450 houses and 5000 families were dismantled for the Kashi Vishwanath corridor, Compensated. | Temples and heritage sites are developed in a planned manner but gaps to be fulfilled. |
| Availability of social and recreational amenities to all | Poor amenities, lack of hygiene maintenance.                        | Public toilets, IT facilities, etc. provided. Needful-scale development. | Parks and tanks are provided but poor maintenance.                         | Poor landscape, absence of public amenities.                                                             | Signage and water facilities- provided through PRASAD, HRIDAY, etc. Not maintained.    |

### Way Forward

Because urban risks are amplified during the COVID period, the government and civic organizations must reconsider the idea of making cities sustainable as envisioned by SDG 11 and take strong steps toward implementation. Although COVID presents a significant set of issues, it is not for once; further improvements to our system are also required. SDG localization for a country like India is a huge challenge considering the diverse culture and traditions of the growing population. The SDG implementation process for a class I city such as Mathura-Vrindavan or Puri, becomes very critical as there can't be any significant alterations as the city reaches its saturation level. In the case of class III cities like Dwarka, it becomes easier to execute the projects for achieving the SDG targets or development in general since they have the required number of resources. After analysing the issues of the cities, it is noticed there is a wide gap in the working of the development organizations and local departments of a city which need to work collaboratively. Further, a provision for appreciation or award for the progress or completion of the works could be proposed under a policy framework such as HRIDAY or PRASHAD to encourage the public and the workers. In the future for a successful inclusive revitalization of heritage assets in cities, a diverse range of Inclusive city, National ministries, State ministries, Local communities, residents, businesses, NGOs, charitable trusts, Independent agencies, and Global institutions and guidelines working in cohesion is required. The table below represents the opportunities to achieve the targets of SDG 11 for the selected religious cities.



Source: Author

Table 3: Opportunities and potentials for achieving SDG 11 goals

| Target goalsby 2030                    | Mathura-Vrindavan:     | Madurai                                            | Puri                                         | Varanasi                                                                                  | Dwarka                                                 |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Inclusivity and participatory planning | Religious significance | Historic and religious importance among the public | United public for the developmen tof tourism | Cultural unity, Under HRIDAY,11 projects are proposed/ imple mented (total fund:89.31cr). | Local craftsmanshi p, total HRIDAY allotted- 19.56 Cr. |

|                                                                              |                                                                       |                                                            |                                                    |                                                                                      |                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Heritage conservation                                                        | sacred heritage value, government funding for heritage protection.    | Architectural marvel, sacred heritage value                | Coastal tourism economic benefit                   | Sacred river water, Kashi Vishwanath corridor, Ring Road proposal under AMRUT        | Ancient sacred heritage value, coastline                  |
| Availability of social and recreational amenities to all                     | Natural rivers and tanks, high tourist influx can generate high taxes | Southern architectural style temple design, public support | Active State Scheme and funds, high tourist influx | Boost health and hygiene with partnerships with international heritage organizations | High tourist footfall, i n-migration, coastal edgetourism |
| Sustainable transport systems                                                | Improving local IPT                                                   | Schemes supporting                                         | High tourist footfall, religious importance        | high tourist influx, regular maintenance                                             | Achieving last mile connectivity                          |
| Universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible, green and public spaces | Works under SCM                                                       | Including locals in planning                               | Proper planning and participation                  | Master plans and zonal plans updated using Arc GIS                                   | Designated spaces                                         |
| Environmental impact of cities                                               | Yamuna River plays significant role                                   | Vernacular Architecture and planning                       | Cyclones impacting economic structure of the city  | Ganga river makes the sacred for tourists and resident                               | Earthquakes impact overall balance                        |

Source: Author

## Conclusion

The paper includes a basic understanding of the SDG 11 localization process while understanding the implementation by taking cases of five Indian religious cities and studying some central schemes that are working for it. After the study and analysis of the SDG 11 localization of Indian religious cities, it is understood that there is a large gap to cover to make the cities and communities sustainable. The SDG 11 targets and indicators' progress refers that we need to make certain reforms in our development policies to achieve them. Mass awakenings and movements are to be initiated to connect history and

smart technology to revive heritage values. Another challenge is the overlap among operational jurisdictions, which must be resolved by giving defined tasks and responsibilities to development agencies while preserving the role of ULBs. These agencies must collaborate effectively. Ward committees must be formed and given appropriate funding to localise SDG 11. Efforts and interventions should be sustainable i.e. socially, economically, environmentally, and culturally enhanced by stakeholder participation and awareness of the policies. While centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) like AMRUT, HRIDAY, Smart City Mission (SCM), etc. have SDG targets that are well-positioned, they are not yet complete enough to support the SDGs' objectives in their entirety. Also, it is well known in India, that every aspect of the environment changes in every kilometer of distance, for which local-level initiatives along with strong partnerships are required to execute the process properly. Various issues have been identified for the selected cities and potential recommendations are provided. This paper attempts to guide scholars, researchers, and professionals working in related fields to study the results to resolve gaps in the

implementation of the SDG localization of Indian religious cities.

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