

Sangam City As Faith-Based Utopia

Debadutta Parida

Assistant Professor, BMS School of Architecture, Bangalore, India,
B.Arch., M.U.R.P. (Master of Urban and Rural Planning),
IIT Roorkee, A.I.I.A., A.I.T.P.

Abstract: The Mahakumbh Mela is a religious festival which attracts millions of people, and is the biggest gathering of human beings anywhere in the world. Every twelve years, on the flood plains where the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati River meet in the outskirts of Allahabad, India, a massive and functional megacity is built in a matter of weeks. This “pop-up” megacity is referred in this paper as “Sangam City”. This paper attempts to observe the unfolding of the extraordinary romanticism that exists in Sangam city through the lens of “faith” and relate it with the concept of “faith-based utopianism”. The data collected is through personal interviews and interactions during the Mahakumbh Mela in 2013, as well as various secondary sources on utopia and the Mela in general. The paper concludes by providing an integrated definition of faith-based utopianism and recommends changing the gaze while looking at communities around the world rather than continue with obsession with their geographic and spatial characteristics.

Keywords: Mahakumbh Mela, Sangam city, faith-based utopia, settlement planning

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sangam city is an ephemeral city born out of ‘instant urbanization’ – a transformation in weeks from an underwater flood plain to a megacity inhabited by millions – making it a “pop-up megacity” (Mehrotra, 2013). This phenomenon of ‘pop-up megacity’ is by virtue of two significant characteristics: ‘rapidity’ and ‘scale’. It is in many ways comparable the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca (although the visitors in Mecca are roughly one tenth of the size compared to the Kumbh Mela), or the Woodstock festival in the US in 1968. It is different from planning aspects in the Olympics villages as well. Unlike the Games Village, Sangam city does not leave behind a legacy of infrastructure after the phenomenon is over. In fact, in a matter of months, there is no trace of the city whatsoever. It is this temporality and ephemeral nature of Sangam city that has caught the attention of many scholars and researchers. The fact that separates Sangam city from other megacities is its exclusivity. Various scholars have multiple views about the very basis of thought of utopianism. (Hardy, 2005) says that ‘Utopianism provides a radical perspective of the future, designed to show how much better it can be. What is utopia for some will be an anti-utopia

for others’. For some, the Mahakumbh may be a logistical nightmare (Somvanshi, 2013) and perhaps a physical dystopia due to the massive environmental effects it has. However, it can be argued that since the basic reason for existence of the Sangam city is faith itself and no other physical or social needs, the megacity is based on faith-based utopianism. Without this measure of immense faith, the Sangam city would simply not exist in the first place, and hence this study would not have any relevance at all.

This paper is an exploratory study in the context of utopian communities. It aims to gain familiarity with the phenomenon of utopian principles proposed by various scholars as well as achieve a new insight into it. Specifically, the paper examines the possibility of a theoretical base for faith-based utopian communities by drawing an analogy between Sangam city and Faith-based Utopian communities. The important research question is “Is Sangam city a faith based utopia?” The paper has been divided into three parts. The first part contains information regarding various aspects of the Mahakumbh and the formation of Sangam city. This is followed by a review of various notions of utopia, which comprises the second part of this paper. Concepts of religious utopia and social utopia have been extensively researched for

centuries by scholars. However, very few scholars have explored into the concept of faith-based utopia; hence it remains largely an unexplored topic. The third part provides a new definition of faith based utopia by the author, and the notions that objectively contribute to it. The paper loosely concludes exploring relationship between faith and physical issues due to temporality (Mehrotra, 2015), and possibilities of finding a balance from the point of view of utopian planning.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The investigation is based on qualitative data collected personally by the author during his visit to Sangam city for the Mahakumbh Mela in 2013, through interviews with local people in the Mela. Apart of the visit, the study was partially carried out as an academic research work by the author since 2013, followed by in-depth study of various secondary data related to the subject. Most of the publications referred in this paper are English language publications, which makes the study slightly biased in terms of language. Also, given the growth in attention of scholars towards the Mahakumbh, similar studies may have been published since this research was undertaken.

III. SANGAM CITY

Sometime in 1895, after visiting the Mahakumbh in Sangam, Allahabad, the great writer Mark Twain said "It is wonderful, the power of faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and the frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining. It is done in love, or it is done in fear, I do not know which it is. No matter what the impulse is, the act borne of it is beyond imagination, marvellous to our kind of people, the cold white." (Gupta, 2013). The Mahakumbh Mela is a religious festival which attracts millions of people, and is the biggest gathering of human beings anywhere in the world. Every twelve years, on the flood plains where the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati River meet in the outskirts of Allahabad, India, an ephemeral megacity is built in a matter of weeks. This ephemeral megacity is referred in this paper as "Sangam City".

Before getting into the discussion regarding the relevance of the existence of Kumbh as a faith-based utopia, it is necessary to understand the basic thrust of the event, which has been drawing people towards it since centuries. It is the size of the city itself. Between 2000 and 2010, the population of New Delhi increased from 15 million to 22 million, while Shanghai's population increased from 14 to 20 million (Khanna, 2013). If we compare that with the Sangam city near Allahabad – the first day of the Mahakumbh Mela in 2013 had a gathering of ten million people. It is estimated that by the end of five weeks, approximately 100 million people would have moved into and out of the city. It took nearly 60 years for the population of Istanbul to grow tenfold from 1 million and nearly 50 years in case of Lagos. At Sangam city, the population rose from zero to 10 million in just a week's time.

(Khanna, 2013). There is a sharp contrast to the other cities of similar magnitude by virtue of Sangam city's sheer 'rapidity' of growth and 'hugeness' in terms of numbers. It is this mammoth people flow that has attracted many research teams of all natures and varied aspirations to the city. The scale of the Mela, along with the explosion of various senses makes people attracted towards the spectacle through sheer faith. The Mahakumbh Mela is attended by millions as a culmination of their pilgrimage which involves a single-day of ritual bathing in the Ganges. Bathing in the waters of the rivers is traditionally a sacred act, which is believed to bring about spiritual cleansing and a rebirth of sorts of the human mind. These devotees may be called as 'faithful' for this study since they do almost all of the work in good faith even in absence of perfect order and amongst apparent chaos during the Mela.

IV. CONCEPT OF UTOPIA

The concept of utopia has been explored since a long time. The concept was introduced by Thomas More in 1516 in his book "Utopia", wherein he mentioned utopia as an original idea of a perfect society. Although he pointed at social and urban aspects of the world at that time, various scholars have explored into other aspects such as physical (Friedmann, 2000) (Fitting, 2002) (Ahmed, n.d.; Koch, 2012), political (Koch, 2012; Moraes & Fagerlande, 2009) and religious (Boyle, 2006; Friedmann, 2000). In totality, utopia was understood as a perfect social-political-legal society. Other thoughts on the subject looks upon utopia as a concept that was hopeful (Friedmann, 2000; Hardy, 2005) towards the future. In fact, (Friedmann, 2000) argues that utopia is the capacity to imagine a better future which is based on everyday experiences of the people. He further advocates a radical approach in urban planning, in which utopian thinking can be both critical as well as constructive. (Moraes & Fagerlande, 2009) further says utopian society must have a great degree of freedom of thinking without the presence of authoritarianism in any form.

A lot of scholars argue that the concept of utopia is philosophical and highly subjective (Boyle, 2006; Ganjavie, 2012; Hardy, 2005). (Hardy, 2005) says that "what is utopia for some may be an anathema for others". This idea finds further support in fields such as urban planning, wherein scholars put light on the fact that utopia is ideally a geographical concept (Fitting, 2002; Koch, 2012) and cities have their own individuality, own life and they go through a variety of emotions such as tragic, joyful, sorrowful or lively (Alston, 2012). A lot of scholars agree universally that utopia is a positive concept (Alston, 2012; Boyle, 2006; Fitting, 2002; Friedmann, 2000; Moraes & Fagerlande, 2009). However, this idea is not without its share of criticism. (Friedmann, 2000) argues that there is considerable ambiguity among urban planners about achieving utopia, and hence advocates radical approaches in planning. He further recommends focussing on the process rather than outcomes, and other important aspects such as good governance and practices of all stakeholders. (Ganjavie, 2012) further states that "there is lack of coherence" in various creative urban ideas existing currently. In the modern context, narratives of

false modernity and utopia have become a dominant way of reading (Koch, 2012). (Koch, 2012) further proposes utopia to be a subject of bordering practice, something like a boundary object for research, allowing inter and multi-disciplinary studies on the matter. In doing so, it can also be understood as a realm in between imaginary and real.

Very few scholars have mentioned faith as an important component of study in the subject of utopia, especially in physical context. Only (Boyle, 2006) and (Friedmann, 2000) agree that religious faith can provide satisfactory experiences to the society. Western notions of utopia is a result of unjust principles of nineteenth century planning (Fitting, 2002), which are usually biased towards physical and geographic aspects with few exceptions. (Boyle, 2006) argues the importance of sharing of similar beliefs and having belief in an eternal divinity, which is the base of existence of a religious society. However this view can be contested on the grounds that religious utopia refers to a kind of single mindedness which is uncharacteristic of a just society. Religious beliefs may satisfy sections of society, yet they are bound by a set of written social rules and regulations. Hence, the author proposes the concept of “faith-based utopianism” which is an integration of various concepts discussed, yet is very particular about subjectivity, focus on individual freedom rather than a collective belief, which is global but works local, where there is no room for authoritarianism, and where superstitions and alternate philosophical ideas are easily accepted and respected.

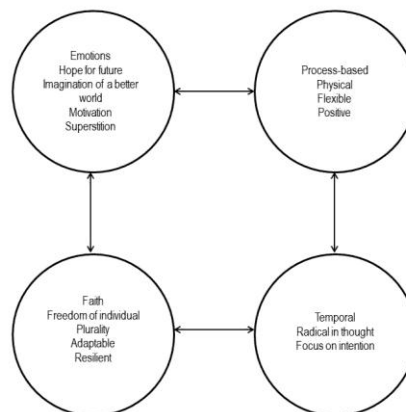
V. FAITH BASED UTOPIANISM

In order to delve further into the concept of faith based utopia, one needs to understand the basic difference between ‘religion’ and ‘faith’. While religion essentially deals with a collective belief where everyone exists in harmony by believing in a common path, faith is an individual’s beliefs and thus may differ from person to person. Scholars have proposed concepts of social utopia and religion based utopia in the past, but the basic crux of faith-based utopianism is that it is conceptually broader than thoughts about religious utopia since it reaches out to everyone in the society, simply because everyone may have his or her own set of beliefs, which may differ from others in the same geographical boundaries. The perception of faith-based utopia is not only geographic (Koch, 2012), but is in fact a philosophical concept in line with Thomas Moore’s utopia (1526), wherein utopia is related with a society where all systems are perfect, only adding that the viewer of the society must change his or her gaze. The author hence proposes a more adoptable and flexible explanation of faith-based utopianism which is given as follows:

“Faith based utopia refers to a philosophical, geographic and socio-political concept, highly temporal, whose existence is based on a common faith or goal (supernatural, material, legal, social etc.), wherein all responsibilities are carried out by individuals in good faith, even though other aspects such as material comfort and good governance are present adequately or not”.

In the context of Sangam city, it can be strongly argued that it is the people or the ‘faithful’ who wilfully share

responsibilities out of faith, and do not interfere in each other’s individual roles before and during the existence of the ephemeral city. Each visitor to the Kumbh mela goes with a unique set of aspirations and a certain sense of hope to fulfil his soul. Faith-based utopianism is a philosophical concept where in spite of numerous physical problems and lack of basic amenities, people in the Sangam city stay in those five weeks without complains, in spite of minimal infrastructure facilities. For the “faithful”, the place is a utopia (not geographically but philosophically just like (Boyle, 2006)’s concepts), while for others who would like to see it through the lens of planning or management, the city might seem to be a physical dystopia and logistical nightmare. There is a significant common sense, logical application, concentration and motivation among the people to find their way among the chaos to satisfy their souls through a dip in the holy river. Various interactions with the people on the ground in Sangam city during the Mahakumbh mela confirmed that majority of the people do not care about the chaos and unhealthy conditions in the city – but are more concerned about fulfilling their souls. Despite unhealthy conditions, extreme weather, poor food and risk of disease, devotees who attend such collective rites have higher levels of mental and physical wellbeing. An ecologist from Pakistan, Dr. Arshad Ali Beg, states that, “all humans, including people who feel a sense of calm and bliss over the polluted Ganga, are under stress, and hence look for reversal of the stress. Since they go to the yatra with firm belief, are blessed in some ways that satisfies their soul. To them the polluted water does no harm” (Beg, 2012). Since the millions of ‘faithful’ carry out all their responsibilities during the Mela with total faith and are not bothered by the numerous social, physical, psychological challenges put forth by the city, there are aspects of faith-based utopianism in Sangam city.



Source: author

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of Faith-based utopianism

However, one must realise that physical issues in settlements is a significant consideration which cannot be undermined or overlooked while looking at the planning of faith based communities such as Sangam city. Studies by (Seth, 2013) and (Somvanshi, 2013) on the after effects of the Mela in 2013 on the environment reveal how the Mela contributes to increasing the pollution levels of Ganges. Cleaning of the Ganges is not merely an aesthetic issue, but a livelihood issue for hundreds of families depending upon it for irrigation. Add to all of this the enormous amount of waste

generated by the Mela resulting in banned practices such as manual scavenging after the Mela. It must be acknowledged that the success of the Mela depends a great degree on its temporality. If the Mela would go on for a few more months, then it would pose serious health hazards, logistical issues apart from issues of law and order. Hence the integration of temporal nature of geographical space in the proposed definition was vital.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper primarily focussed on understanding the various aspects of utopianism both as a process and a concept. Two ideas form out of the overall narrative. Firstly, the concept of utopia is highly subjective and contested. The concept is multi-faceted (physical, social, religious, faith, political etc.). It can be also seen as a boundary object, so that multi-disciplinary opinions can be integrated easily. Secondly, Sangam city is a classic example of temporality, wherein a megacity is constructed and deconstructed within a few weeks. Almost all the planning processes, human to human interactions and human to nature interactions happen with complete faith, in spite of all the logistical and physical issues prevalent. This makes it a case of faith-based utopianism in terms of planning and existence itself. Conceptually and theoretically, the paper has proposed an integrated and flexible definition of faith based utopianism with a conceptual framework, wherein the four main parameters have been provided. It is important to acknowledge that the concept proposed is not a fixed set of parameters but set of loosely woven aspects which focuses on processes through which an ideal society can be viewed. This notion questions the very idea of utopia, which is seemingly something that does not exist or is unachievable. But perhaps, there are various conceptual formations of utopia around us for societies to unravel and see, only if we choose to change our gaze towards them, away from the geographic and material point of view that we are so obsessed with.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Dr. Sandeep Agarwal, Professor & Inaugural Director, University of Alberta for going through the earlier drafts of this paper and giving his valuable suggestions on the theme. The author is thankful to Manjul Pratap Singh, K. V. Abhishek and Neelakshi Joshi (urban planners) for their kind help and coordination during visit to the Kumbh Mela in February, 2013. The usual disclaimers apply.

REFERENCES

[1] Ahmed, W. (n.d.). Neoliberal Utopia and Urban Realities in Delhi.

- [2] Alston, R. (2012). Class cities : Classics, utopianism and urban planning in early twentieth-century Britain. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 1–10. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2012.04.006>
- [3] Beg, M. A. A. (2012). *Life Processes Health Disease and Aeging*. Karachi: Research and Development Publications.
- [4] Boyle, J. (2006). *Theological Designs : Religion in Utopia*, 1, 94–95.
- [5] Fitting, P. (2002). *Urban Planning/Utopian Dreaming: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh today*.
- [6] Friedmann, J. (2000). *The Good City : In Defense of Utopian Thinking **, 24(June).
- [7] Ganjavie, A. (2012). Role of Utopia for Design of Future Cities : Utopia in Urban Planning Literature, 5(3), 10–19. <http://doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120503.1922>
- [8] Gupta, A. (2013). *Unfolding faith: A journey to the Kumbh*.
- [9] Hardy, D. (2005). Utopian ideas and the planning of London, 20(January), 35–49.
- [10] Khanna, T. (2013). Studying India's Mahakumbh Festival. Retrieved April 28, 2013, from <http://www.hbs.edu/news/Pages/item.aspx?num=90>
- [11] Koch, N. (2012). Urban "utopias": the Disney stigma and discourses of "false modernity," 44(page 51), 2445–2462. <http://doi.org/10.1068/a44647>
- [12] Mehrotra, R. (2013). Kumbh Mela. Retrieved April 28, 2013, from <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/#academic-programs/urban-planning-design/urban-design/ud-work/faculty-work/kumbh-mela.html>
- [13] Mehrotra, R. (2015). *Kumbh Mela: Mapping the Ephemeral Megacity*.
- [14] Moraes, S., & Fagerlande, R. (2009). Research in progress Penedo: a Finnish utopian colony in the tropics, 24(2), 241–254. <http://doi.org/10.1080/02665430902734343>
- [15] Seth, S. B. and B. L. (2013). Can Faith heal? Retrieved February 21, 2013, from <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/can-faith-heal>
- [16] Somvanshi, A. (2013). Don't congratulate us. Retrieved April 29, 2013, from <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/dont-congratulate-us#slidnumber>
- [17] Mallet, V. (2013). Could Hindu festival "pop-up megacity" be an unorganized model for India? Retrieved April 28, 2013, from <http://www.indiaafricaconnect.in/index.php?param=news/5772/panorama/115>
- [18] Hindu, T. (2013). Kumbh "pop-up" megacity sparks Harvard case study. Retrieved April 28, 2013, from <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-in-school/kumbh-popup-megacity-sparks-harvard-case-study/article4327079.ece>
- [19] Pais, A. J. (2013). Inside the ultimate pop-up megacity. Retrieved March 11, 2013, from [http://www.rediff.com/news/slide-show/slide-show-1-special-inside-the-ultimate-pop-up-mega-city/20130311.htm\[2013\]](http://www.rediff.com/news/slide-show/slide-show-1-special-inside-the-ultimate-pop-up-mega-city/20130311.htm[2013])