

The Role of Urban Haats in Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Urban haats play a crucial role in safeguarding India's intangible cultural heritage by offering vibrant, inclusive platforms where traditional crafts, folk performances, oral traditions, culinary heritage, and regional festivals come alive in urban settings. In a time of rapid modernity and globalization, these haats serve as cultural pillars that bind individuals to their heritage. This paper explores how urban haats contribute to the revival and sustenance of dying art forms, empower local communities, and promote cultural exchange, all while enriching the urban experience. The study uses real-life examples and case studies to analyse the impact and challenges of urban haats and offers suggestions for their improvement.

Keywords: Urban Haat, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Traditional Crafts, Folk Performances, Culinary Heritage, Community Empowerment, Cultural Preservation

1. Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage, often called ICH, is about stories, skills, and customs that people carry forward through generations—not through buildings or monuments, but through practices, performances, rituals, and everyday ways of life. It can be a community get-together for a folk performance, a grandmother teaching her grandson to weave, or a unique cuisine prepared exclusively for festivals. Communities are held together by these living strands. There's a serious chance that these customs will become less prevalent as cities expand and life gets faster. This is where Urban haats plays a vital role. They are more than just marketplaces; they are like windows into a culture's heart, where long-standing customs are openly shared with the contemporary world.

2. Literature study

An urban haat most often called simply haat is an open-air market that serves as a trading venue for local people. An urban haat is a temporary open-air market that acts as a commercial platform for locals. Haat is important in the lives of local communities because it serves as a hub for gathering news and information, exchanging ideas and knowledge, and participating in various social, cultural, and religious activities. Consumer goods firms have a huge chance to market and sell their products to the rural population through haats. Haats are often found in well-connected areas where they serve as regional nodes and cater to a big population. Though urban haats serve a variety of purposes, their principal function is to provide a marketplace and open spaces for local communities. In many rural areas, permanent shops and markets are already appearing, but historically, the haat was a transitory market where people could buy products they couldn't get elsewhere. (Sharma & Zama, 2022)

A place where a human being does not feel like an individual but rather as part of a group of people who gather and engage with others of the same or different cultural backgrounds. The formation of a model of the world requires socio-cultural space. Structure, coexistence and cooperation, and coordination are among its qualities and extents. structural semantic information, as well as cultural components organization. It allows people of many cultures, ethnicities, and races to come together and promote their traditions while also experiencing new cultures that they are unfamiliar with. It's a location where you can grow culturally and socially. People from various cultures dress differently, have diverse languages, customs, beliefs, philosophies, and behaviors. (Sharma & Zama, 2022) Social spaces provide a platform or space in which people can come in contact with the social world outside and experience the opportunity of being with, seeing and hearing others which instills stimulation. It's a place where individuals can see something new, feel something different, learn something new, and be inspired. The public sphere can be viewed as both a place and an experience.

A well-designed space should offer a clear structure, safety, and stability while being easy to navigate. Controlling vehicle access ensures pedestrian comfort, and eco-friendly, functional amenities add to the experience. Adding seating areas encourages people to pause and engage with the space, while visually and physically appealing entrances make the area more welcoming and accessible.

(Sharma & Zama, 2022)

3. Reviving the Soul of Tradition- Urban Haats as Vessels of Living Heritage

In today's rapidly evolving world, numerous traditional crafts, stories, and customs are slowly disappearing. Nevertheless, Urban Haats play a crucial role in their resurgence. These vibrant outdoor markets serve as cultural centers, offering more than just shopping opportunities. They foster an environment where heritage is tangible and vibrant, featuring artisans who skillfully revive endangered crafts, as well as folk musicians and dancers who uphold oral traditions. The harmonious blend of folk music, the aroma of local dishes, and the vibrant colors of handmade art reflect India's rich cultural tapestry. Furthermore, these markets provide a platform for artists and local communities to showcase, celebrate, and express their identities, whether through workshops, festivals, or leisurely strolls among the stalls.

3.1. Reviving Dying Crafts Through Urban Haats

One of the most significant and potent contributions made by urban haats is the way they help breathe life back into traditional crafts that are slowly disappearing. The elaborate brushwork of Madhubani painting, the exact artistry of Dhokra metal casting, the handloom weaving that has been handed down through the generations, and the weaving of bamboo and cane in isolated tribal settlements are just a few of the ancient crafts that are fighting for survival throughout India. Due to a decline in the number of practitioners and the lack of demand in contemporary metropolitan marketplaces, many craftspeople are compelled to abandon their labor in favor of more commercially viable jobs. Urban haats provide these craftspeople with a lifeline. By eliminating middlemen and creating direct channels between the maker and the buyer, haats ensure fair compensation and recognition for their work. But more than income, they offer respect and visibility. When a visitor stops to watch a weaver at their loom or a painter creating a traditional motif, there's a moment of connection—between past and present, between tradition and urban life. For many artisans, participating in an urban haat is not just about survival; it's about dignity, pride, and the ability to continue their family's legacy with hope for the next generation.

3.2. Keeping Oral Traditions & Folk Performances Alive

Storytelling forms such as regional folk music, traditional dances, and oral narratives are not just forms of entertainment; they are deeply rooted cultural expressions that carry centuries of wisdom, community history, and shared values. (Reports on the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003-2022) Urban haats provide these performers with a rare and valuable stage to showcase their art in the heart of the city. (Celebrating Craft and Community: Annual Report. New Delhi, 2022) Unlike crowded festivals where performances are rushed or overlooked, haats offer dedicated spaces where the audience can truly connect with the artist. When a puppeteer sets up their stage or a Baul singer begins to sing, it becomes a moment of immersion—not just in music or dance, but in a whole way of seeing the world. Children stop and watch in wonder, elders smile in recognition, and visitors from different regions are exposed to stories they may never have heard before. These aren't just scheduled events; they become cultural encounters where artists and audiences form meaningful exchanges. (Sharma, 2021)

3.3. Culinary Heritage

The food stalls in urban haats offer more than just meals, they serve as cultural time capsules. Every dish tells a story, every flavor carries the memory of a land and its people. Visitors are invited to experience India's incredible culinary diversity in one place, tasting authentic regional cuisines prepared by those who have preserved family recipes through generations. These are not commercial versions of popular dishes, but soulful meals that reflect traditional cooking methods, local ingredients, and cultural rituals. Each bite is like a passport to a different state. The culinary corners of urban haats become living kitchens, where food is not only eaten but celebrated. They foster inter-regional appreciation, create jobs for home-based cooks, and allow urban audiences to reconnect with their roots in the most delicious way possible. Indian cuisine is a rich tapestry of regional dishes influenced by variations in soil types, climate, occupations, and the availability of locally sourced spices, herbs, vegetables, and fruits. Today, a destination is celebrated not only for its architecture, climate, and history but also for its distinct culinary offerings. The definition of culinary tourism involves visiting restaurants, food producers, food festivals, and locations primarily to taste or experience food, making it the main motive for travel. Though food tourism is still in its early stages of development, tourists increasingly recognize that cuisine offers a unique lens through which to experience and understand a region's culture and indigenous heritage. Urban haats provide a unique culinary experience by offering a diverse range of regional dishes from every corner of India in one vibrant space. These haats serve as microcosms of India's vast culinary map, allowing both domestic and international tourists to sample authentic, home-style meals prepared by individuals who have inherited these recipes over generations. This variety not only satisfies the palate but also deepens cultural understanding, making urban haats important destinations for culinary tourism. As travelers increasingly seek immersive and authentic experiences, the food offerings at urban haats contribute significantly to tourism by making cuisine a central element of cultural exploration. (Singh & Srivastav, 2023)

3.4. Platform for Regional Festivals & Cultural Events

Urban haats often host state weeks or cultural festivals that spotlight a particular region's art, craft, cuisine, and performances. These events mimic the atmosphere of rural fairs and connect city dwellers with their ancestral traditions. Seasonal celebrations are often observed with authentic rituals and displays. In addition to these scheduled festivals, haats frequently incorporate regional folk music, dance performances, storytelling traditions, and even ritualistic processions, making the environment lively and

immersive. These experiences transport urban audiences into the heart of local traditions, fostering emotional connections with the art forms and providing much-needed exposure and appreciation for regional culture. They also promote cultural tourism by drawing in visitors eager to witness the vibrancy and diversity of India's intangible heritage all in one place.

3.5. Empowering Local Communities and Artists

Urban haats are a source of both economic and emotional empowerment. They offer livelihood opportunities to artisans and performers while also giving them visibility and recognition. These platforms restore dignity to traditional occupations that have often been marginalized in urban economies. Through direct communication with consumers, craftspeople can explain the cultural background and time-consuming procedures that underline their creations, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation for handcrafted goods. Additionally, many haats support female entrepreneurs and self-help groups initiatives. The women, who frequently come from underprivileged or rural areas, not only become financially independent but also gain social recognition, confidence, and respect. Urban haats assist in redefining the role of women in cultural preservation—not just as stewards of tradition, but also as its entrepreneurs and ambassadors—by providing workshops for skill development, microenterprise assistance, and special booths for women's collectives.

4. Case study

4.1 Dilli haat, INA

The late 1980s saw the emergence of the Dilli Haat concept in reaction to the growing prominence of contemporary retail and the waning appeal of traditional Indian handicrafts. In partnership with the Indian government's Ministry of Textiles, the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC) launched the project. As part of a reclamation project, the six acres of land that now house this expansive complex were saved and turned into a stunning dream plaza. In order to enable craftspeople from all over India to directly sell their wares, a permanent marketplace akin to a traditional Indian bazaar was to be established. It acts as an outlet centre and a source of support for struggling artists. These stores rotate every 15 days, giving customers the chance to visit a new collection of stores on occasion and encouraging them to return time and time again. a food court that unites different cuisines from various states. The complex's architectural features, which include stone roofs, lattice, and brickwork jail, were specifically created in the traditional style. There is a village feel to the little thatched-roof cottages and kiosks. Platforms, which serve as a link in the Bazar design, are where the shops are situated. To maintain a soft aesthetic, grass is strewn throughout the stone-paved courtyards that separate the stores. (Tanty, 2024)

Figure 1: Dilli Haat, INA



4.2 Dilli haat, Pitampura

Dilli Haat as always is considered a destination of all seasons. The complex is set up culture, 7.2 acres. There is an unmatched culture, and a mosaic of diversity associated. As times have changed, Delhi Tourism came up with this Haat all enveloped with a crisp and contemporary feel ready to celebrate the shades moods, events, legends and festivals of India. Dilli Haat Pitampura is located on a strategic point that is easily accessible from various centers in the city. The Haat has 108 craft stalls along with Amphitheatre with a capacity of 450 persons, three air-conditioned halls for exhibitions/conferences/workshop/ seminars/ school functions, performing art/ music and dance show. The Haat has a lot of landscaped area with terraced roof gardens. The basement parking of Haat can accommodate nearly 250 cars and as many two wheelers.

Figure 2: Dilli Haat, Pitampura



4.3. Dilli Haat Janakpuri

‘Haat Beat’ was the starting point to this design competition entry in 2005. Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation had invited entries for a Dilli Haat in Janakpuri - a massive site with a large residential audience, in a part of Delhi that had very few places to go out to. DTTDC has promoted music all across Delhi with its concerts and other initiatives. The idea was to give them a home for playful music and give these homes a place to play with music. This was the underlying layer that /bonded the overall program of formal and informal shops to sell crafts and celebrate culture; to inject a new life into this part of Delhi and be its rhythmic ‘heartbeat’. (Archohm, 2015)

The site was a large six-acre northwest facing contiguous piece that turns southeast towards the end. The plot is bound by the main bus terminus on one side, the Tihar jail (a national prison) greens on the other side and a large commercial road in the front. The complex is planned with two entrances: a primary face with vehicular and pedestrian zones and a secondary rear entry for pedestrians into the craft-only zone. (Archohm, 2015)

Figure 3: Dilli Haat, Janakpuri



5. Comparative analysis

Table 1 Comparative analysis of Dilli Haat INA, Pitampura, Janakpuri

Factor	Dilli Haat INA	Dilli Haat Pitampura	Dilli Haat Janakpuri
Location	INA, South Delhi, near AIIMS, well-connected by metro and road.	Pitampura, North Delhi, near TV Tower, suburban setting.	Janakpuri, West Delhi, near district center, residential area.
Architectural Features	Traditional Indian aesthetics with vernacular elements, Jali work, open courtyards, pitched roofs.	Modern interpretation of traditional haat with amphitheater, green cover, and water bodies.	Mix of contemporary and traditional styles, with murals, artworks, and cultural motifs.
Permanent Stalls	62 permanent shops designed with traditional themes.	Limited permanent stalls, more open spaces for events.	More permanent structures than Pitampura, but less than INA.
Temporary Stalls	Open space for 100+ rotating vendors.	Dedicated space for temporary stalls during fairs.	Similar to INA, with provision for rotating artisans.
Pathways & Circulation	Well-defined pathways with stone paving and open plazas.	Wider pathways with open green spaces.	Integrated pathways with plazas and seating areas.
Site Analysis	High footfall due to central location, close to tourists and residents.	Less crowded than INA, more event-focused, good green spaces.	Community-driven market attracts local visitors more than tourists.
Intangible cultural heritage	They uniquely preserve India's intangible heritage through folk music, dance, puppet shows, and	They offer a festive rural vibe in an urban setting, with its amphitheatre and gardens hosting folk	They provide a quieter cultural space that highlights lesser-known crafts and folk traditions

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	storytelling, while live craft demonstrations like Madhubani painting and pottery foster artisan-visitor interaction. Its regional food stalls further celebrate India's culinary diversity.	performances, traditional theatre, and cultural workshops that promote dynamic heritage exchange.	through workshops, performances, and exhibitions, fostering deeper engagement with India's traditional knowledge and heritage.
Spatial Organization	Central open market with shops around, food court on one side, cultural spaces.	Large open spaces with landscape gardens, amphitheater, and event areas.	Linear layout with a mix of open and covered stalls, central performance area.

6. Creating awareness among urban citizens

For many people living in cities, urban haats are often their first real chance to experience the depth and diversity of India's culture up close. These aren't just markets—they become lively spaces where people can learn, connect, and explore different traditions in an informal, engaging way. Kids who've never seen a potter shaping clay, a weaver working a loom, or a folk artist performing live, suddenly find themselves surrounded by vibrant colours, sounds, and stories that bring India's rich heritage to life.

Adults, too, often reconnect with crafts and cultural tales that they might have heard growing up but haven't seen in years. The workshops held at these haats are more than just hands-on activities—they're a form of storytelling, where every art form is tied to a deeper history or philosophy. Watching an artisan create something from scratch helps people understand the skill, patience, and heart that goes into handmade work, often inspiring them to value and support these traditions more.

Storytelling sessions—whether based on mythology, folk tales, or local legends—capture the imagination while subtly passing down wisdom, values, and a sense of shared culture. In this way, urban haats feel like open-air classrooms, where learning happens naturally through curiosity, conversations, and cultural connection. They help keep India's living heritage alive, one story and one handmade piece at a time.

7. Creating awareness through architectural design guidelines

- Draw on public consultation and involvement to include all age ranges and social groups in design ideas.
- The use of aesthetic elements on site, such as a water fountain, open spaces, and seating areas, complements the natural landscape.
- Each zone has its own unique setting and includes dynamic social places.
- To create a sense of tranquilly and a rest space in the urban haat by using appropriate plants.

- To incorporate environmentally friendly elements such as pervious surfaces, biofilter landscaping beds, high efficiency lighting, and solar-powered facilities. The proper layout of public open spaces has an impact on pedestrian traffic. To make social spaces more flexible to fulfil the requirements of all members of society and Indian culture. (Sharma & Zama, 2022)

8. Challenges faced by urban haats

Urban haats, while rich in culture and tradition, are struggling to stay relevant in the face of modern challenges. Unlike malls and entertainment hubs that are widely advertised and attract steady crowds, haats often depend on word-of-mouth and receive minimal promotion. This lack of visibility means many people remain unaware of the unique, immersive experiences haats have to offer. Artisans, especially those from rural areas, face additional barriers such as complicated paperwork, long waiting times for stall allotments, high rents, and short tenure periods—all of which make it difficult for them to participate and sustain their presence. Moreover, as cities expand, haats are often relocated to the outskirts, making them harder to access and resulting in less foot traffic. The absence of basic facilities like clear signage, clean restrooms, and seating areas further diminishes the visitor experience.

Another pressing issue is the shifting preferences of today's consumers, who are increasingly drawn to fast, affordable, and mass-produced goods. Handmade crafts are often perceived as expensive or old-fashioned, with little awareness about their cultural and artistic value. This disconnect makes it difficult for artisans to engage modern buyers, especially younger generations. In some haats, the presence of factory-made products has further diluted their authenticity, turning them into ordinary markets rather than spaces that celebrate heritage. Additionally, the lack of a strong online presence limits opportunities for artisans to share their stories, promote their work, and reach broader audiences. In a digital age, staying offline is a missed chance for visibility, growth, and preservation of cultural identity.

9. Conclusion

Urban haats are vital to preserving the intangible cultural heritage of India, not just as physical markets but as living expressions of culture, creativity, and community. They serve as dynamic spaces where tradition meets modernity—where a weaver from a rural village can interact with an urban designer, or where a child can witness a folk performance for the first time. These haats play a unique role in ensuring that the heritage of storytelling, crafts, music, dance, and food doesn't get lost in the noise of urban life. To strengthen their impact, urban haats need more than admiration—they need structured support. This includes stronger policy frameworks that recognize them as cultural institutions, funding to maintain their infrastructure, and collaborative efforts with NGOs, academic institutions, and cultural ministries. There must also be regular training, marketing, and digital exposure for artisans to thrive in changing times. Most importantly, cities must stop viewing these haats as temporary attractions or tourism boosters and instead embrace them as cultural ecosystems. These are spaces where identities are shaped, stories are told, and intergenerational connections are forged. By nurturing urban haats, we not only support artisans but also ensure that India's intangible cultural heritage remains alive, relevant, and celebrated in the heart of its cities.

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