

---

## **REINSTATING THE LOST LOGIC OF HIMALAYAN TOWNS, A CASE OF KULLU**

**Nikhil Sanjay Shah**

*Master of Urban design students, SPA Delhi*

**Prateek Draik**

*Master of Urban design students, SPA Delhi*

**Mohua Moitri**

*Master of Urban design students, SPA Delhi*

---

**Abstract:** Settlements in the hilly regions by virtue of their setting represent a distinct form that is responsive to varied factors; geographic, climatic, topographic and other minutiae of conditions that guide the habitation. There is a specific growth pattern (almost as though emerging from the place itself) they undergo unlike the cities or towns in plains, which in present times have been growing indefinitely, making these as developments which are more non-generic, rooted and quintessentially models of urban processes in Indian scenario that need to be deliberated, in order to regulate and guide the development as they are under persistent pressures of urbanization also to observe the notion of urbanism in Indian context. The paper would look at the identification of key determinants that have shaped the urban form, nature of habitation, the cultural processes and intermittent tourist inflow in recent past which brings about the challenges of urbanization faced by the Himalayan town of Kullu and the way forward.

---

### **Introduction:**

**Key Form Determinants:** Kullu valley, in the state of Himachal Pradesh comprises of distinctive topographical features; the hills, plain lands and presence of rivers; the Beas and Sarvari. These are the primary determinants of the urban form that have shaped the settlement historically. The valley is less steep in comparison to the gorge formation in the region around which appropriates the emergence of the settlement. There have been a multitude of factors that guided the way settlement grew over time; the strategic location, siting of elements, Maidan (flat plains in the heart of the settlement) and the cultural processes that emerged from mythological beliefs and anecdotes, that have determined the development. The Dhalur Maidan is the heart of the city and key determinant of the urban form, which once used to be paddy fields of the Rani of Raja Jagat Singh, where the festivity of Dussehra is observed in present times.

Kullu expanded linearly, edged by Beas on the East and the steep slopes on the west, along the north-south road. It is when the bridge over Sarvari was built post-independence, and that road became a vehicular bypass to Manali, that the town grew slightly westward (and upward), assuming a roughly triangular shape.

**The Kullu Dussehra & Cultural Significance:** Kullu Dussehra was declared as an international event in 1972 and is witnessed by around 4-5 Lac people from across the globe every year. In the year 2015, it was registered in the Guinness book of world record and became a sought after festivity. It commences on the tenth day of the rising moon that is 'Vijaya Dashmi'. This week long festival starts with a procession of Lord Raghunath, along with other deities, carried on a Ratha across the town. The village Gods and minor deities are also a part of this celebration. The center of the festivities is the Dhalpur maidan where all the gods descend from their respective adobes (around 300 villages located in the hinterland of kullu) and become part of Dusshehra. This event also is a place for people to communicate with their gods and discuss about their grievances. During Dusshehra, the Dhalpur area becomes the main node of Kullu, where different ceremonies take place in addition to commerce and administration.

---

The Maidan is the place where temporary tents are set up and people gather around their respective deities.

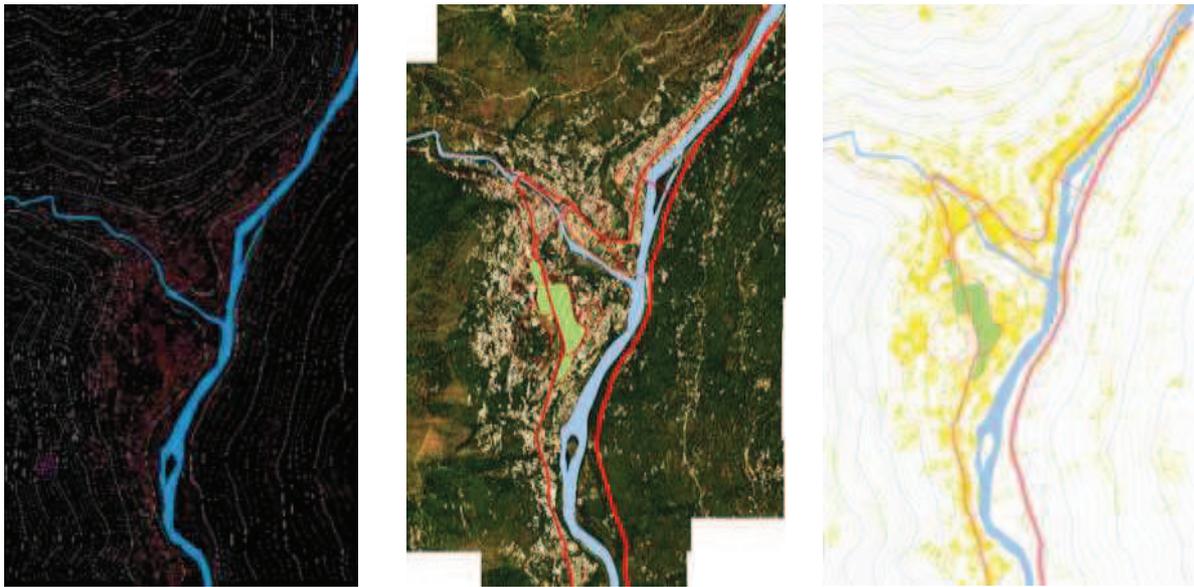
**Present Day Conditions:** In present times, due to formation of Kullu-Bhunter agglomeration and airport at Bhunter, the festivity has become more prominent with huge influx of tourists. Traffic congestion during Dussehra due to the influx of thousands of visitors in public and private transport, causes much upheaval and confusion. A control measure taken by the authorities is restricting vehicular traffic in the busiest section of the road, which gets converted into a pedestrian 'mela' street for the festival, and redirecting it via a bypass. This addresses the issue of traffic congestion partially, and creates other minor inconveniences like inaccessibility to some parts of the town. Moreover there is a view of affluent to commercialize the city for tourist and build hotels, resting places in the foothills below the Dhalpur Maidan making the edge along the river even more vulnerable and prone to flooding, ecologically even more adverse. The way forward being, evolving temporary shelter for the visitors that further enhances the cultural ethos of the festival and let people experience it in its true spirit. Another matter of concern is the conflict between the Government and the religious authorities over the rituals and the ownership of Dhalpur. While the former intends to tap the potential of the maidan as more than just a ceremonial space, the latter wants to retain its identity and historic significance. Hence the development needs to address the historicity of the place; the rituals and their relevance in present times closely linked with the identity of people thereby establish an apposite continuum.

Most habitations fall prey to meta narratives, that haul the unwritten manifesto governing our perception of the nature of settlements, its most elemental form- the latent wisdom informing the place- shall be endangered of its own identity and existence. Settlements in hilly regions by virtue of their setting represent a distinct form that is responsive to varied factors: geographic, climatic, topographic and other minutiae of conditions that guide the habitation. There is a specific growth pattern (almost as though emerging from the place itself) they undergo unlike the cities or towns in plains, which in present times have been growing and expanding indefinitely, making them as developments which are more non-generic, rooted. They quintessentially are models of urban processes in Indian scenario that need to be deliberated, in order to regulate and guide the development as they are under persistent pressures of urbanization, also to observe the notion of urbanism in Indian context. The paper would look at the identification of key determinants that have shaped the urban form, the nature of habitation, and the cultural processes that have evolved over time and become intrinsic to place-making and intermittent tourist inflow which is an outcome of the Dussehra festival turning into a global spectacle in recent past, which brings about the challenges of urbanization faced by the Himalayan town of Kullu. An inquiry has been made into the two important factors that have been the driving forces of rapid urbanisation of Kullu. First is Kullu town's physical subjugation of the Dhalpur maidan and second, its prominent power of place that has aligned an array of administrative, commercial, cultural centres around its edges, transforming it into a strong example of contemporary urban nucleus of the town.

**Evolution:** There are three types of pre-colonial cities in the Himalayas: trade cities, symbolic cities and fortified cities (Himalayan Cities). Kullu, like Chamba, Mandi and Rampur Bushahr, is a trade city with deep symbolic connotations. The typical trade city in the hills is located along a river, on a trade route, around a flat ground. This flat ground is a place of trade, festivity, ritual, fairs, cultural exchange, and a portal to the world outside. Dhalpur maidan is the primary heart of Kullu, a focal point where culture converges through ritual, power accumulates through symbolic artifact, and city connects to the wider circuits of trade and migration.

Kullu valley, in the state of Himachal Pradesh comprises of distinctive topographical features: the hills, flat lands and rivers- Beas and Sarvari. These are the primary determinants of the urban form that have shaped the settlement historically. These elicited the growth of the older settlement core- Sultanpur- and characteristic urban forms like the Maidan (flat plains in the heart of the settlement).

The valley is the movement corridor channeling trade between Ladakh in the North and Mandi and Punjab in the South, and immigration both from Ladakh in winters, and from Ayodhya. Hence, locating the administration centre along this spine would ease the function (Fig2). The importance of Kullu as the administrative centre is its central position in the valley.

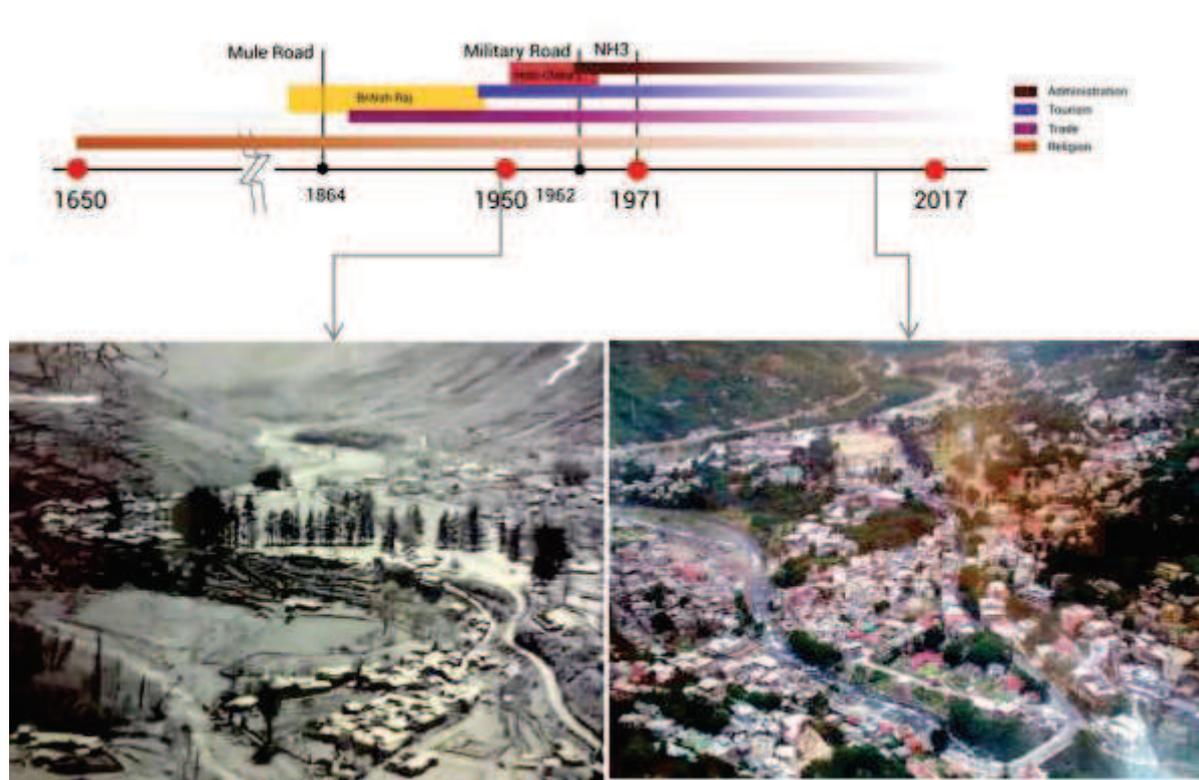


**Mythology:** There are mythological citations which have significantly dictated the formation of the settlement: the establishment of the kingdom has this myth that a Brahmin was accused by Raja Jagat Singh in ignorance and for atonement of the same he had to bring idols of Raghunathji and Sita from Ayodhya, which he successfully accomplished. Raja Jagat Singh, eventually shifted his kingdom's capital from Naggar to Sultanpur (present day Kullu) and established Raghunath temple in 1650, to cure his leprosy and celebrate the setting up of the temple (Fig1). To celebrate this event, the Rani of Raja Jagat Singh donated her paddy fields for the auspicious festivities of Dussehra which in present times is the heart of the city, the Dhalpur Maidan. This shift of capital also helped, as this place became vital as a new religious centre and also it became an important place for administration because of its centrality. The valley is less steep in comparison to the gorge formation in the central region of the Kullu valley, which appropriates the emergence of the settlement. There has been a multitude of factors that guided the way the settlement grew over time: the strategic location, siting of elements- the Maidan, Rupi Palace, Raghunath Temple, Akhara- and the cultural processes that emerged from mythological beliefs and anecdotes, that have determined the development. The Dhalpur Maidan is the heart of the city and key determinant of the urban form, which once used to be paddy fields of the Rani of Raja Jagat Singh, where the festivities of Dussehra are observed in present times.



**The Summit Of Gods In The Flat Plains Of Dhalpur, Amassing Vivid Array Of Beliefs Into A Thriving Urbanity**

Since the flat lands of Kullu (Dhalpur Maidan) were owned by the queen, and were a unique feature in this central area of the valley, they were used for growing paddy before being donated for the public interest to carry out rituals and ceremonies. Generally they are used as playgrounds and place for public gathering. The spur between Beas and its tributary Sarvari was the vantage point where the royal palace, Rupi palace was established (Sultanpur). The town grew around it, and became the centre for commerce, administration and religion. The market place named Akhara developed along the edge of the river which was surrounded by resting facilities for travellers and merchants. Although today Dhalpur is developed as a part of Kullu, Sultanpur is still identified by its old name as 'Sheher'(town), to which people still refer to as going to 'the city'.



**Commons:** The most primary shape givers of hill settlements have been the elements like river, trade route and presence of flat land (Maidan), around which the settlement self organizes. These essentially are the commons which become central resources that the communities develop, allude cultural references to and promulgate over generations. These commons have observed transformations over time with its shifting perception amongst the community and the processes that operate outside their immediate physical realm. The old historic core aligned itself over the highlands of Sultanpur, geographically a place from where the valley could be governed, and the edges along the river emerged as urban commons that developed as marketplace leading to the Dhalpur maidan which was privately owned yet put to community use. There has been a shift in perception of these commons over time which has resulted in urban conditions that now have impact over the cultural associations with the Maidan, which is gaining a global presence. This has lead to subdivisions within the flat land and designated areas where ceremonies happen in the confines of generic urban settings debarring the place from its unique experience. The processional routes of the deities and the congregational place observes the essence of the place, while the commercialization of the event has lead to ubiquitous transient expressions like that of formalized seasonal fairs juxtaposed over the rituals traditionally observed for centuries.

Kullu expanded linearly, edged by Beas on the East and steep slopes on the west, along the north-south road. It is when the bridge over Sarvari was built post-independence, and that road became a vehicular

bypass to Manali, that the town grew slightly westward (and upward), assuming a roughly triangular shape.

**Ritual:** Kullu Dussehra was declared an international event in 1972 and is witnessed by around 4-5 Lac people from across the globe every year. In the year 2015, it was registered in the Guinness book of world record and became a sought after festivity. It commences on the tenth day of the rising moon that is 'Vijaya Dashmi'. This week long festival starts with a procession of Lord Raghunath, along with other deities, carried on a Ratha across the town. The village godlings and minor deities are also a part of this celebration. The center of the festivities is the Dhalpur maidan where all the gods descend from their respective adobes (around 300 villages located in the hinterland of kullu) and become part of Dussehra. This event also is a place for people to communicate with their gods and discuss about their grievances. On the 6th day of the festival, an assembly of village Devtas takes place, and on the tenth day the idol of Rawana is taken to the river bank and their ritual of staking arrows into it takes place. The last day of the celebrations is marked by sacrifices: a fish, a crab, a rooster, a buffalo and a lamb are sacrificed and a huge bonfire is lit. Thus one can see the difference between the Kullu Dussehra and the Dussehra being celebrated in different parts of the country. This mega-festival witnesses the worshipping of around 250-300 idols from the adjoining villages of Kullu. The idol of Ragnath ji is brought back to its original place through a grand procession. During Dusshera, the Dhalpur area becomes the main node of Kullu, where different ceremonies take place in addition to commerce and administration. The Maidan is the place where temporary tents are set up and people gather around their respective deities.

**Transformation:** Kullu has transformed from a city that thrived on a trade route to a city that thrives on tourism circuits. Its old location on the trade link between Punjab and Ladakh, and the Silk Route, has been replaced by its new strategic situation within the tourism networks between the metropolitan of Delhi and distinguished destinations like Leh Ladakh, Lahaul Spiti, Manali, Manikaran, Kasol and Kheerganga. It serves as a destination itself during Kullu Dussehra when about twenty times the population of Kullu visits the Dhalpur maidan ritually from all over the world over a course of ten days, transforming the city temporarily.

Being the administrative center for its district, the city also accommodates the seat of authority, administration and governance. And also owing to the apple cultivation the British introduced to the valley during the Raj, today's Kullu thrives on tourism, government services and horticulture.

But the transformation has not only happened in terms of movement and economy. The river Beas has changed its role from being symbolic of mythology and sustenance to that of being a sewage channel, a source of hydroelectric power, and of value for tourism and real estate. The sacred climbs and forests have become sites of trekking and tourism, and precious flat lands that operated as active community spaces or provided agro-pastoral opportunities have been misappropriated by the dominant economic systems for tourism and real estate.

The key catalysts of change- the road, tourism and people's aspirations (Arunav Dasgupta- The Bharmour Report) are transforming the city in a process we call urbanization. This is quite evident in the RCC-framed houses, the growing consumptive lifestyles and the rapidly shifting socio- economic systems of the city, that are generic to any other urban centre in India. But what have remained constant, or have only adjusted to the novel developments, are the rituals of old, the attunement of lifestyles and activities to seasonal cycles, and the r-urban dynamic of livelihood. Kullu has always been welcoming of new narratives that the trade or tourist routes have brought it, making it a historically cosmopolitan node in the landscapes of the Himalayas.

The area of impact the city has has always been far reaching- from being instrumental to the rare corridor through the great barrier of the Himalayan mountains, connecting Punjab plains to the Silk Route, to being the convergence of over 300 village godlings and their entourage, to being the seat of imperial and religious power of a kingdom, and now that of an administration, to hosting millions of tourists a year.

**Apathy:** In present times, due to formation of Kullu-Bhunter agglomeration and airport at Bhunter, the festivity has become more prominent with huge influx of tourists. Traffic congestion during Dussehra due to the influx of thousands of visitors in public and private transport, causes much upheaval and confusion. A control measure taken by the authorities is restricting vehicular traffic in the busiest section of the road, which gets converted into a pedestrian '*mela*' street for the festival, and redirecting it via a bypass. This addresses the issue of traffic congestion partially, and creates other minor inconveniences like inaccessibility to some parts of the town. Moreover there is a view of the affluent to commercialize the city for tourists and build hotels and resting places in the foothills below the Dhalpur Maidan making the edge along the river even more vulnerable and prone to flooding, and ecologically adverse. The way forward being to evolve temporary shelter for the visitors that further enhances the cultural ethos of the festival and lets people experience it in its true spirit. Another matter of concern is the conflict between the Government and the religious authorities over the rituals and the ownership of Dhalpur. While the former intends to tap the potential of the Maidan as more than just a ceremonial space, the latter wants to retain its identity and historic significance. Hence new development needs to address the historicity of the place: the rituals and their relevance in present times closely linked with the identity of people, thereby establishing an apposite continuum.

**References:**

1. Dasgupta Arunav, The Bharmour Report, 2018, SPA Delhi
2. Mehra, Diya, 2016, What Kind Of Urban? A Case Study Of Kullu, A Small Indian Town, 2016, SAGE Publications
3. Brenner, Neil; Schmid, Christian, 2017, Planetary Urbanization, 2017, The Globalizing Cities Reader
4. Shankar, Pratyush, 2014, Himalayan Cities, 2014, Niyogi Books
5. Chetwode, Penelope, Kullu: the End of the Habitable World, 1989, Time Books International

\*\*\*