UNRAVELING THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME A LEARNING CITY: A CASE STUDY OF THRISSUR CITY, KERALA

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Abstract

 Our world is transforming at a fastest pace where the social, economic, and political norms keep on changing constantly. There are also many issues that need to be addressed, which are consolidated into the 17 Sustainable Development Goals targeted to be achieved by 2030. The SDGs focus on curbing the challenges faced by many countries and are aimed at creating a better world to live in. According to the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities Guiding Documents, Lifelong learning can lay a base to increase the citizens' efficiency by helping them develop their knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes throughout their lives which in turn helps the society to overcome its challenges at the grass root level. In the case of Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala, it is the mayor's vision to make the city, an equitable, multi-generational, and digital learning ecosystem. The premise of the present study is to focus on the factors that lead Thrissur to become a 'Learning City' in Kerala.

*IndexTerms* – **Lifelong learning, UNESCO GNLC, Learning cities**

Introduction

The concept of lifelong education was proposed by both **the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Council of Europe** "as involving a fundamental transformation of society so that the whole of society becomes a learning resource for each individual" (Cropley, 1979: 105). The concept of lifelong learning does not have a clear-cut definition. Cities play an increasingly influential role in achieving the SDGs. It is against this backdrop that the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) – the only organizational unit in the UN family with a global mandate for lifelong learning – initiated the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) to help local governments develop lifelong learning strategies (Strategy of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (2021–2023)). The network promotes policy dialogue and peer learning among member cities; forges links; fosters partnerships; provides capacity development; and develops instruments to encourage and recognize progress made in building learning cities. Thus, lifelong learning is the foundation of sustainable social, economic and environmental development which shapes the heart of UNESCO's learning city concept.

Study Area

Thrissur City, known as the Cultural Capital of Kerala, is the district headquarters of Thrissur Kerala, India. The city covers an area of 101.42 square kilometers and is located in between the latitudinal extension of 10^{0}31'17.06" N to 10^{0}32'30.48" N and the longitudinal extension of 76^{0}13'31.11" E to 76^{0}14'23.30"E. According to 2011 census, the total population of Kerala State, Thrissur District and Thrissur Municipal

Corporation are 3.34 crores, 31.21 lakhs, and 3, 15,957 respectively. Thrissur Municipal Corporation shares 10.12% of the population of Thrissur District and the district population shares 9.34% of Kerala state. Thrissur district ranks 4th position in terms of population among other districts of Kerala state. The population density of Thrissur Municipal Corporation is 3, 115 persons per sq. km. While considering the age-sex pyramid of the city, it can be understood that the female population is lower compared male population in the age group 0-15 years, whereas the male population is lower in the age group 35-50 years and in the age group 60yrs and above. The reduction in the number of the female population in the age group 0-15 years needs attention since this shows the reduction in child sex ratio which will result in a decline in the female population and hence the reduction of the total sex ratio in the future. More number of people in the age group 25-35 shows the working potential of the population. The higher number of the female population in age above 60 years shows the higher life expectancy of females compared to males. The Thrissur Municipal Corporation has 97% literates, the rate of which shows an increasing trend from 1981 onwards. All these show the importance of education as well as the remarkable human resource potential of Thrissur. The presence of various educational institutions in the city area as well as the awareness of the need for education among the citizens are the reasons for the higher literacy rate in the city. As per the 2011 Census, the total number of workers in Thrissur Municipal Corporation area is 1, 13,105, which is 35.80% of the total population. Out of this, 72.07% are male working population.
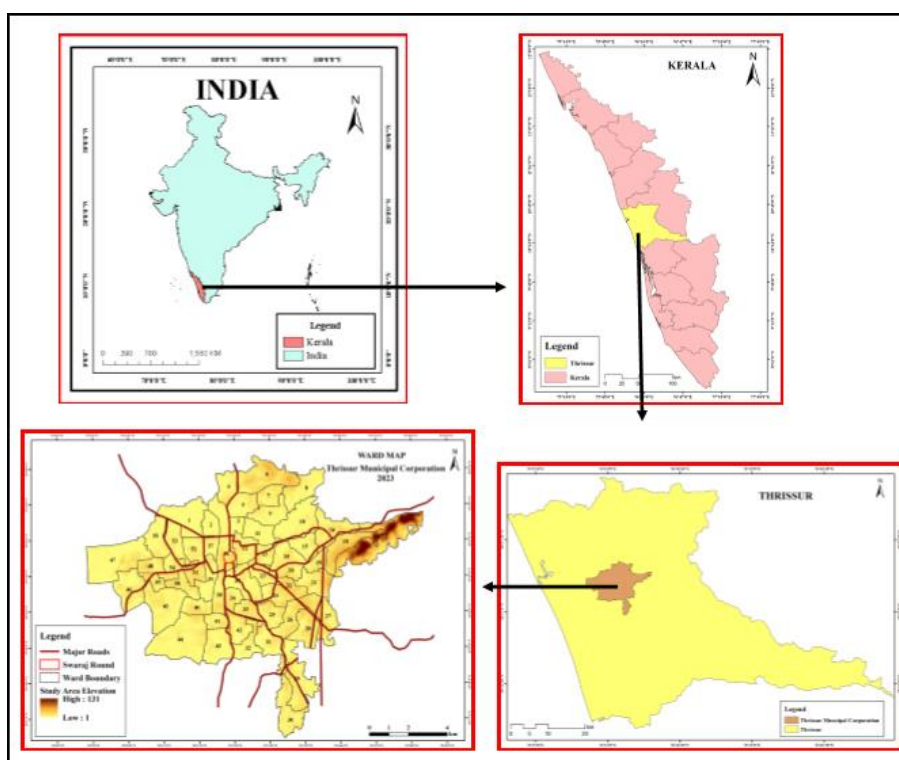
Location Map of Thrissur City

Methods and Methodology

The data collection for the present study was done with the help of online and offline surveys, in-depth personal interviews with the officials at the municipal corporation office, focus group discussions among the academicians and students and a review of the Master Plan of Thrissur City-2031. These surveys and interactions helped to learn about the diverse learning needs of the community and how the various institutions in the city can play a role to satisfy these needs.

Results and Discussions

The study intends to identify the potentials and challenges of the city while transforming itself into a learning city. Some of the potential areas identified are, location of prominent institutions, availability of open spaces, celebratory events and festivals, presence of training institutions, prominence of primary education facilities, presence of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME), and proposal for an Urban Infotainment Center.

Thrissur, being a city of the most cultural significance throughout its history, one of the strongest potential

lies in the location of these cultural institutions at the heart of the city. In addition to these institutions, one should also consider the viewpoints shared by many dignitaries who represented these institutions at the One Day Conference on 'Playful, Learning and Livable Thrissur' on November 7, 2022. They advocate that the concept of Learning City should enable the kind of atmosphere, where the benefits and resources available in these institutions are accessible to all, despite of any differences. The general conscience is to understand the need of finding new ways to incorporate cultural attributes into the contemporary formal education system, especially in Thrissur which is the cultural capital of Kerala. As per the existing land use of 2019, parks and open spaces account for about 0.34% of the total area of Thrissur City. One of the important open spaces in the city is Thekkinkadu Maidan, a hillock that seats Sree Vadakkumnathan temple and is located at the city center, extending up to 65 acres. It serves as an important activity center of the city and hosts the festival of 'Thrissur Pooram'. There are also many other open grounds available across the city that could be utilized to organize various celebratory events. As mentioned earlier, Thrissur Pooram is an annual temple festival held at the Vadakkumnathan Temple from the months of April to May. There is also a Pooram Exhibition organized by the Paramekkavu Bhagavathi Temple Devaswom and Thiruvambadi Sri Krishna Temple Devaswom which is conducted prior to Thrissur Pooram. The legacy of Puli Kali dates back to over 200 years from now which is a folk art celebrated during Onam. Besides these, political debates, motor shows, Buon Natale (the cultural festival organized by the Thrissur Citizenry in association with the Christmas celebrations) etc are also conducted in the Thekkinkadu Maidan. Another prominent ground known as Sakthan Ground also stages various flower shows and exhibitions annually. Thrissur also has training institutions like a police training academy, nursing homes, etc. These institutions can conduct frequent skill development classes for the students and the general public. The technical institutions can aid in enabling a technology-friendly atmosphere in the city by providing classes on basic computer skills. This could ensure that even the elderly are benefitted from the same. The medical training institutes could play a key role in evoking health literacy among the public so that people could understand the need and use of first aid kits and also how to act in a situation that calls for a medical emergency. In this way, people could be more responsive to such situations when they will have to face one. While analyzing the primary education facilities in the city, there are a total of 237 anganwadis in Thrissur Corporation. The status of these anganwadis are quite efficient with the availability of the required infrastructures like play equipments, child-friendly toilets, caretakers, teachers, and nutritious food for children from all sections of the community. The maximum number of MSMEs registered under Thrissur Municipal Corporation is 1,427 numbers. Category wise 13% of the total registered MSMEs in Thrissur City are jewelry and plastic-based enterprises. The second largest share is for 10% are textile based. The Women Entrepreneurs Development Cell (WEDC), functioning under the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, aims to boost motivation and confidence among women entrepreneurs by providing information, advice, and assistance in project design, raw material procurement, technology, finance, and marketing. The Master Plan for the City (2031) proposes for an Urban Infotainment center that aims at the provision of information through entertainment which could result in a diverse learning experience for the city dwellers. In this sense, an urban infotainment center can be the focal point for new and combined learning experiences including cultural education, skill development activities owing to the unique skills and knowledge of the city.

The study also identifies some of the major challenges which should be addressed prior to the city's journey in becoming a learning city. Some of the key challenges are, infrastructure facilities at the government educational institutions, utilization of Thekkinkadu Maidan, traffic issues, public awareness about the celebratory events, social inclusion, safety issues and lack of open educational opportunities.

An observational analysis shows that the private educational institutions has well-maintained infrastructural facilities compared to that of the government institutions. The Vadakkumnathan Temple ground, a well-known heritage site, a children's' park and a place for leisure to the people. One of the major concerns lies with lighting up the place. There have been efforts taken to light up this space, but there is still work needed to be done. There are 'blind spots' that curb the sense of safety among the public. Another major challenge is the traffic that concerns city life. The concentration of commercial activities (markets, street vendors etc) and the inclusion of freight vehicle into the regular traffic of the city adds up to creating a congested and strident atmosphere. The traffic issues faced by the city can be attributed to the lack of necessary implementation strategies by acknowledging the requirements of the city. The majority of the celebratory events that take place in the city are organized at the Thekkinkad Maidan. Despite being organized at the city's center, the strong audience for most of these events is so low. Out of many other reasons, the lack of public awareness is what affects the participation rate here. Kerala is the first state in India to adopt the Kerala Transgender Policy

in 2014. The studies carried out with regard to this policy proposal show that about 58% of transgender students drop out of school before the 10th STD because of harassment, gender-related negative expressions, and unavailability of educational special reservations/quotas. In spite of being a place for community events, the Thekkinkadu Maidan was said to be unsafe to stay after 8 pm at night. This was understood by interacting with the elderly citizens who spend their leisure hours of the day here. Many incidents of theft and pickpocketing have been reported from this area at night. The formal education system in the city is a rigid structure that asks for a number of requirements to be enrolled in any of the courses. Along with the regular academic courses, the city also houses such institutions that formalize cultural education. Also, the continuing education programs available in the city do not have courses that are available to all.

Conclusion

While providing a clear vision of the target impact, the study also helps to identify the risks and to get clarity on what needs to be done. Further clarifications and risk reductions take place with the help of intense discussions among the stakeholders. This initiative is a gradual process that is to be organized systematically and consistently. The purpose is to make the city environment more approachable where people can be safe and participate in community-building activities through learning. The Learning City initiative is powered by the resources available within the city. Thus, Thrissur, the cultural capital of Kerala, can be a flag bearer to this initiative and be an inspiration to the growth of many more learning cities in Kerala.

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