

Application of Social Space as a Tool for Physical Planning: Case Study of Mymensingh Town

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Abstract:- Space has a social dimension. Social space consists of physical space and mental space. Physical and mental perspectives are only able to achieve partial description or cross-sections of space. The general approach of physical planning is concentrated only on physical dimension of space. Most city planners deal with essentially static concepts with land use maps and plans they prepare. They tend to view the city as a static arrangement of physical objects which lacks in mental space. Again, mind is spatially oriented. Hence, there is a gap between the ways our cities have been built and the way people perceive them. Above all, neither the plan nor their underlying studies have successfully depicted the city as a social process operating in space. In the course of time, every section and part of the city takes on something of the character and qualities of its inhabitants. In current (urban) planning process, space is dealt to offer on facilities and services people require to have a better life. It is ignored to explore how they perceive their surrounding and every day's space domain. This paper explores 'social space' as a planning tool and examines its potential application in the physical planning process.

Keywords:- Social Space, Physical Space, Mental Space, Physical Planning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Physical planning may be defined as an art and science that analyse the human activities on space to establish a perfect relationship between the man and the space with a view to achieving a balanced environment in which the human being can live with all their aspirations, goals, and objectives (Murtaza 2012). For hundreds of years the formal planning of towns and cities where it occurred was dominated by physical understandings of place and architectural understanding of practices (Leary 2015). But 'space is not depicted merely as a geographical or physical location or only a commodity, but as

a political instrument, as part of the relations of production and property ownership and as means of creative and aesthetic expression' (Gottediener 1994, p.75). Urban space according to Lefebvre is not a neutral container; rather it is a social construct (Lefebvre 1991).

Furthermore, social relations are spatial and connected to social space; the science of space has failed to incorporate social relations (Babere 2015). Within the social world of which physical space is a part, socio-economic characteristics of human agency illuminate the physical place and show how it is lived (Kerr 1994). The argument is built upon the fact that 'what effects people is not how the physical environment is used, but the social and economic environment in which the physical environment is used' (Babere 2015, p.288). As a result the 'users' passively experienced whatever imposed upon them or justified by their representational space (Lefebvre 1991). In order to understand the process and nature of social space Mymensingh town, a secondary town of Bangladesh has been selected as case study for this paper.

II. LEFEBVRE'S SPATIAL TRIAD

Each element presented in Figure 1 of the triad represents an aspect of the social production of space. Lefebvre's conceptual triad became available to English speakers when English translation of *The Production of Space* was finally published in 1991 (Shields 1999). The relations among these elements reveal clues about the process by which people produce space and are influenced by space in everyday life.

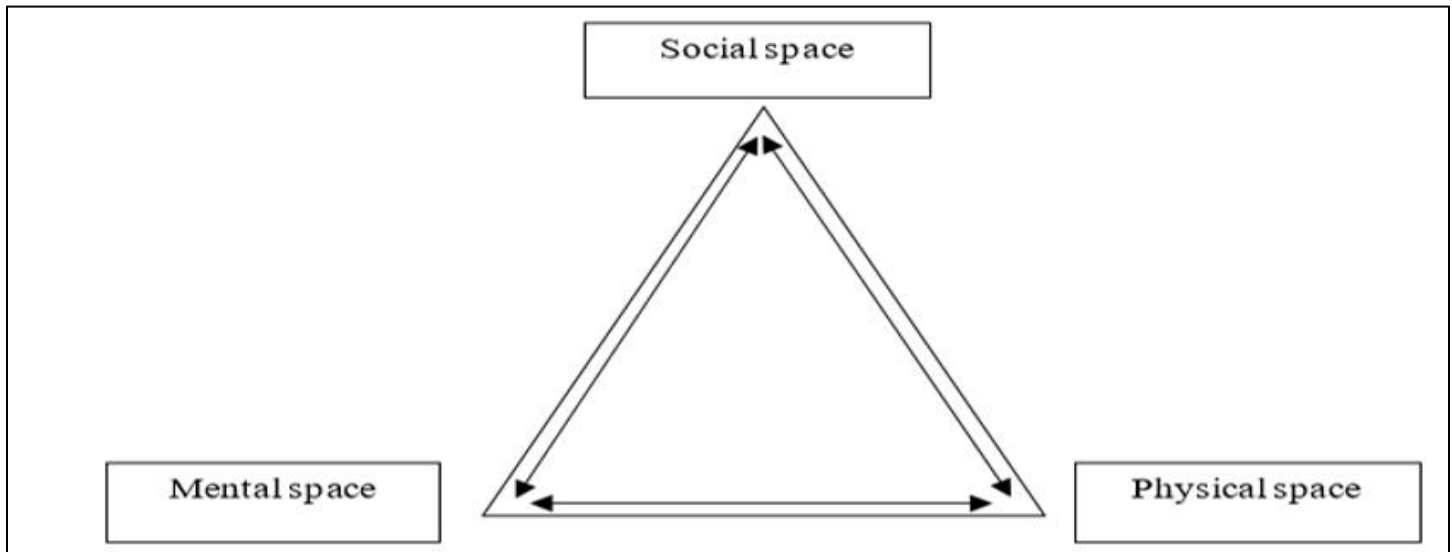


Fig 1: Lefebvre's Conceptual Triad

A. *Physical Space: Spatial Practice/Perceived Space*

The physical environment consists of permanent or semi-permanent structures through which the total formation of an area is established. The other standpoint reveals that human beings can involve the human body to perceive in direct relation to what is physically present.

B. *Mental Space: Representation of Space/Conceived Space*

The second aspect from the standpoint of material space refers to mental activity of planners, scientists, architects, bureaucrats about physical space that exists on paper, in words or on screen as interpretations of material reality. From the standpoint of human experience, mental space refers to the activities of thought into expression as either individual or collective activity.

C. *Social Space: Representational Space/Lived Space*

This aspect of the framework refers to the actual experience of living- it infuses both physical space and mental space. From the spatial standpoint, social spaces are those places that evoke an unusually deep sense of meaning. This space is highly complex and quite peculiar because culture intervenes here.

III. STUDY AREA

Mymensingh town shown in Figure 2 is a central region of Bangladesh, is situated on the Brahmaputra river. It is also the district headquarters. It lies between the 24°43', 24°45' north latitude, 90°23', and 90°25' east longitude. It is located about 120 km (75 mile) north of Dhaka which is the capital of the country. A railway line connecting Dhaka passes through the town and divides it into two sides. The total population of the town was 407,798 in 2011 with heterogeneous character. Its

total area comprises of 31.7 km² (12.2 sq. miles). The Mymensingh municipality was established in 1869. The town has experienced tremendous social, economic, and political changes. Thus, it has a historical past started from the British to the contemporary period. The production of spaces has been altered with the change of time.

IV. EXTRACTION OF SOCIAL SPACE

Social space describes as an area where physical and mental space intersects. Extraction is the process to obtain social space. Spatial practice has direct influence on the production and reproduction of society's space. It is related to the realm of perception incorporating both physical and mental activities. Physical and mental spaces' interaction with each other produces social space.

A. *Extraction Method*

Physical space is also known as perceived space. Space has a perceivable aspect that can be grasped by the senses. It comprises everything that present itself to the senses not only seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting. In this context, physical space is identified through the questionnaire survey by asking respondents to identify spaces that illicit "demand"-spaces occasionally visited or wish to be visited.

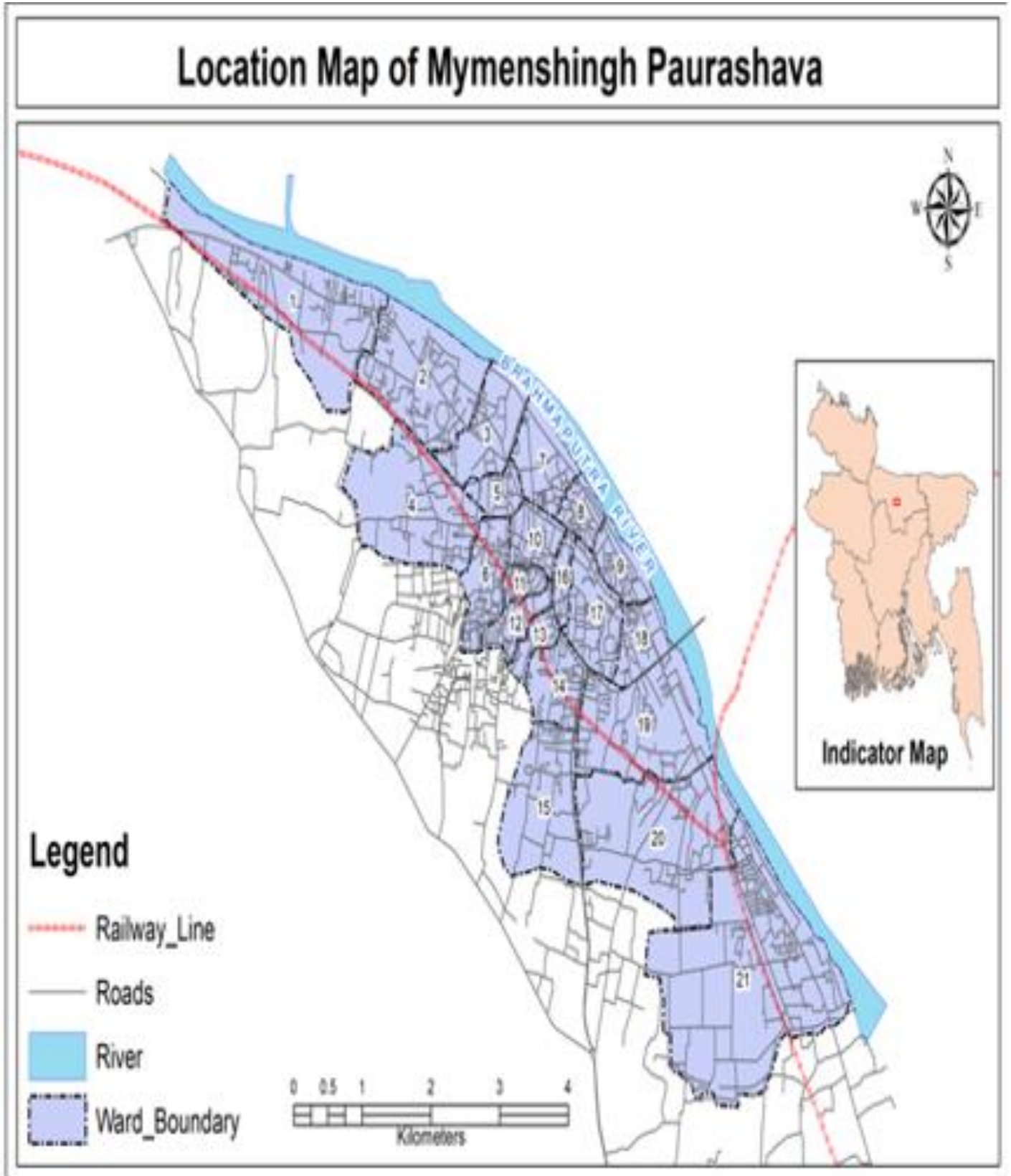


Fig 2: Map of Mymensingh Town

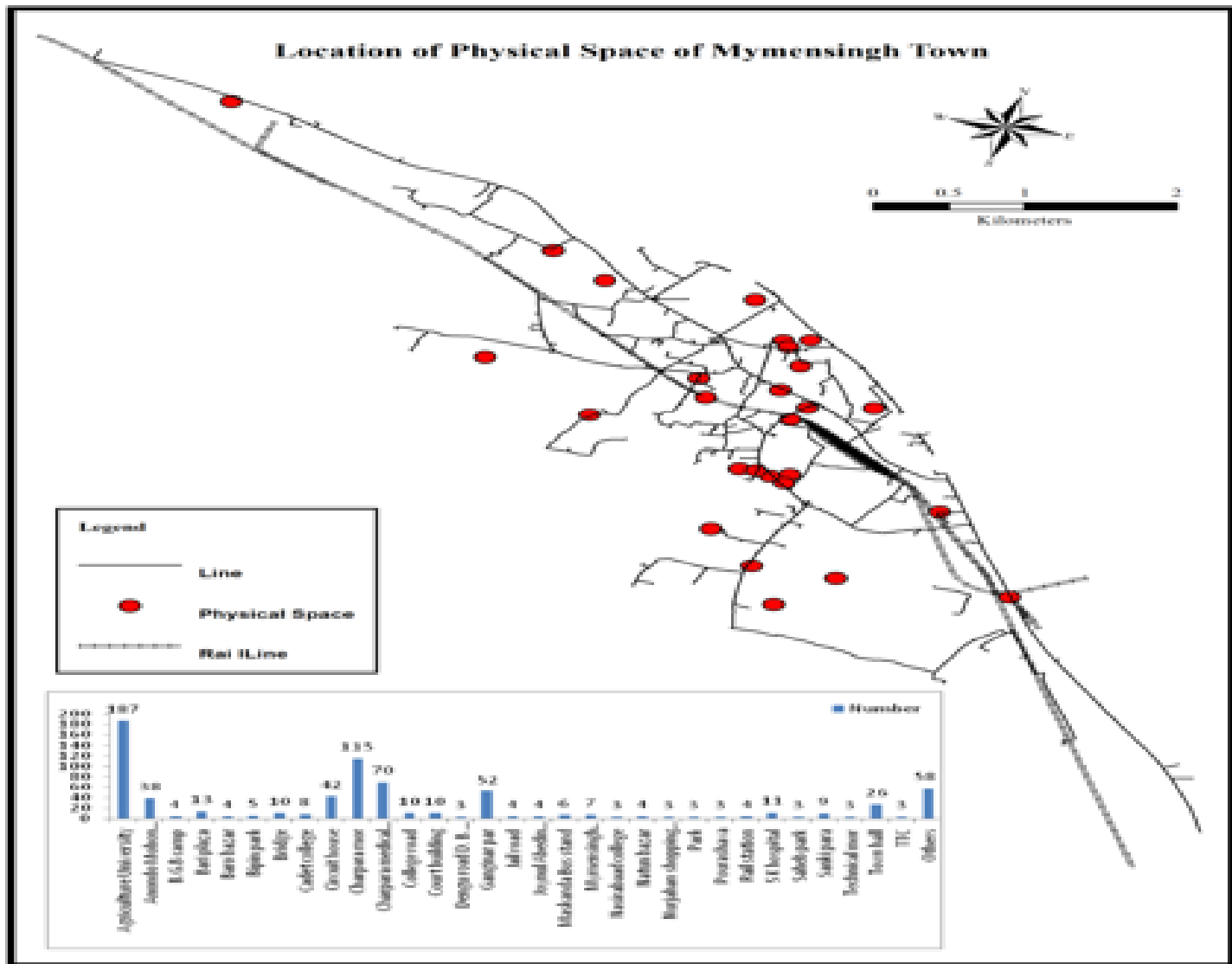


Fig 3: Location of physical space of Mymensingh Town
Source: Field Survey, 2015

Dominant physical space, expressed here as the highest number in y axis according to Figure 3, is very few. Again number represents the frequency of the respondents’ responds to a particular physical space. Agriculture University is the dominant one. Though Ganginar par mor (intersection) is the centre of Mymensingh town, it has scored less than Charpara mor (intersection). Now-a-days different kinds of activities like private hospital, doctor chamber, diagnostic center, medicine store, bank etc. are being flourished in the area. Charpara mor (intersection) is the entry point to Mymensingh town from Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The four lane road has

made the area for a potential location for future investment. “Mymensingh Medical College Hospital” is also situated at Charpara mor. It is a government hospital where people from all strata can go and avail treatment. Ganginar Par and Circuit House (residence of district commissioner) are also marked to be as physical space. Town Hall, not in great extent, has also been considered as physical space. Anado Mohan College, being close to the inhabitants, is not at all comparable to Agriculture University. A spatial orientation of all the physical spaces has also been presented in Figure 3.

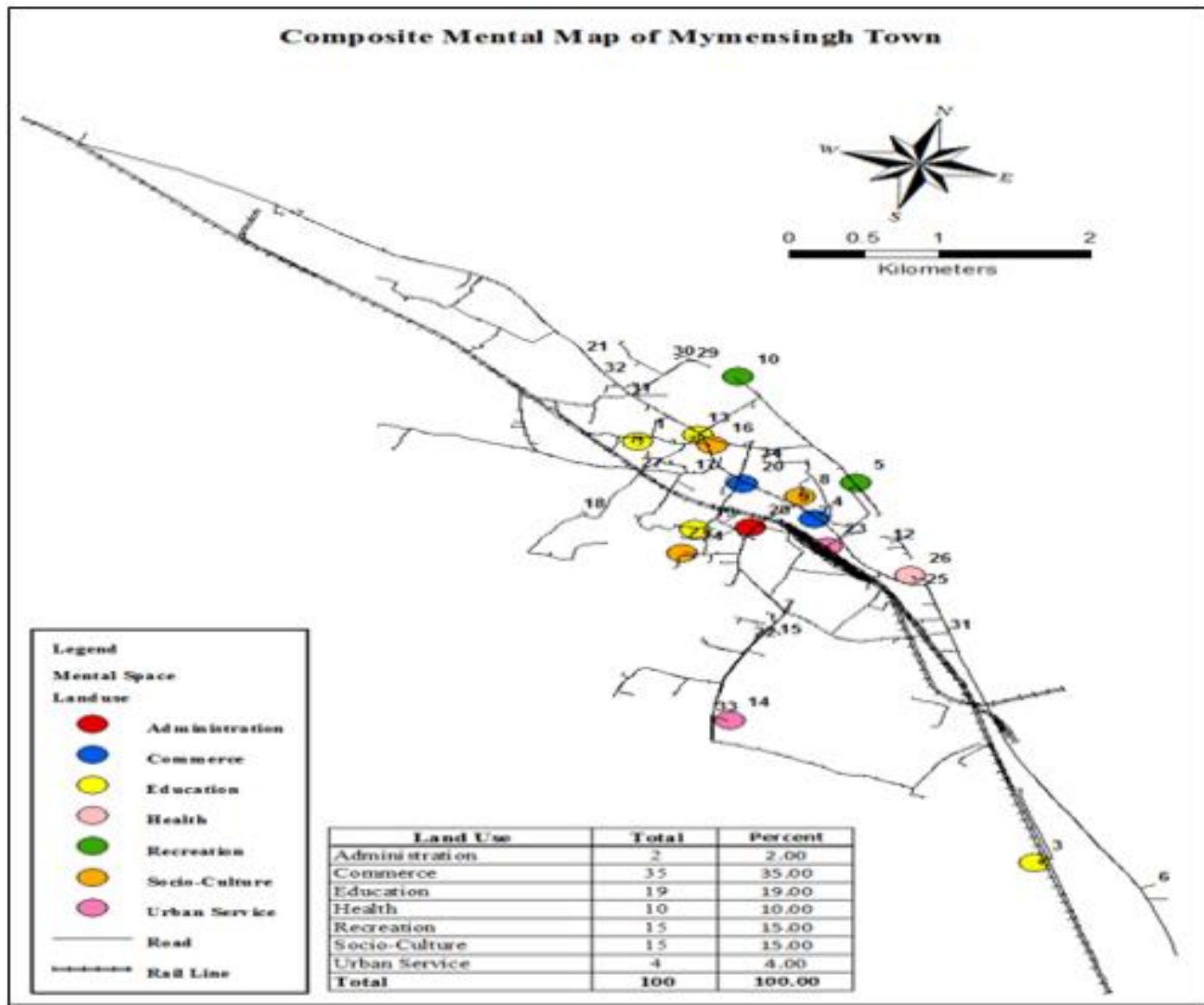


Fig 4: Example of Mental Map
Source: Field Survey, 2015

On the other hand, mental space is extracted from “Mental map” technique that represents respondents’ needs associated to everyday activities shown in Figure 4. It can be said that mental maps are spatial images which people have of the physical environment and which primarily affect spatial behavior of human activities. Mental maps are used to negotiate

space and to assign meanings to different places. ‘If we grant that spatial behavior is our concern, then the mental images that men hold of the space around them may provide a key to some of the structures, patterns and processes of man’s work on the face of the earth’ (Lynch 1960, p. 208).

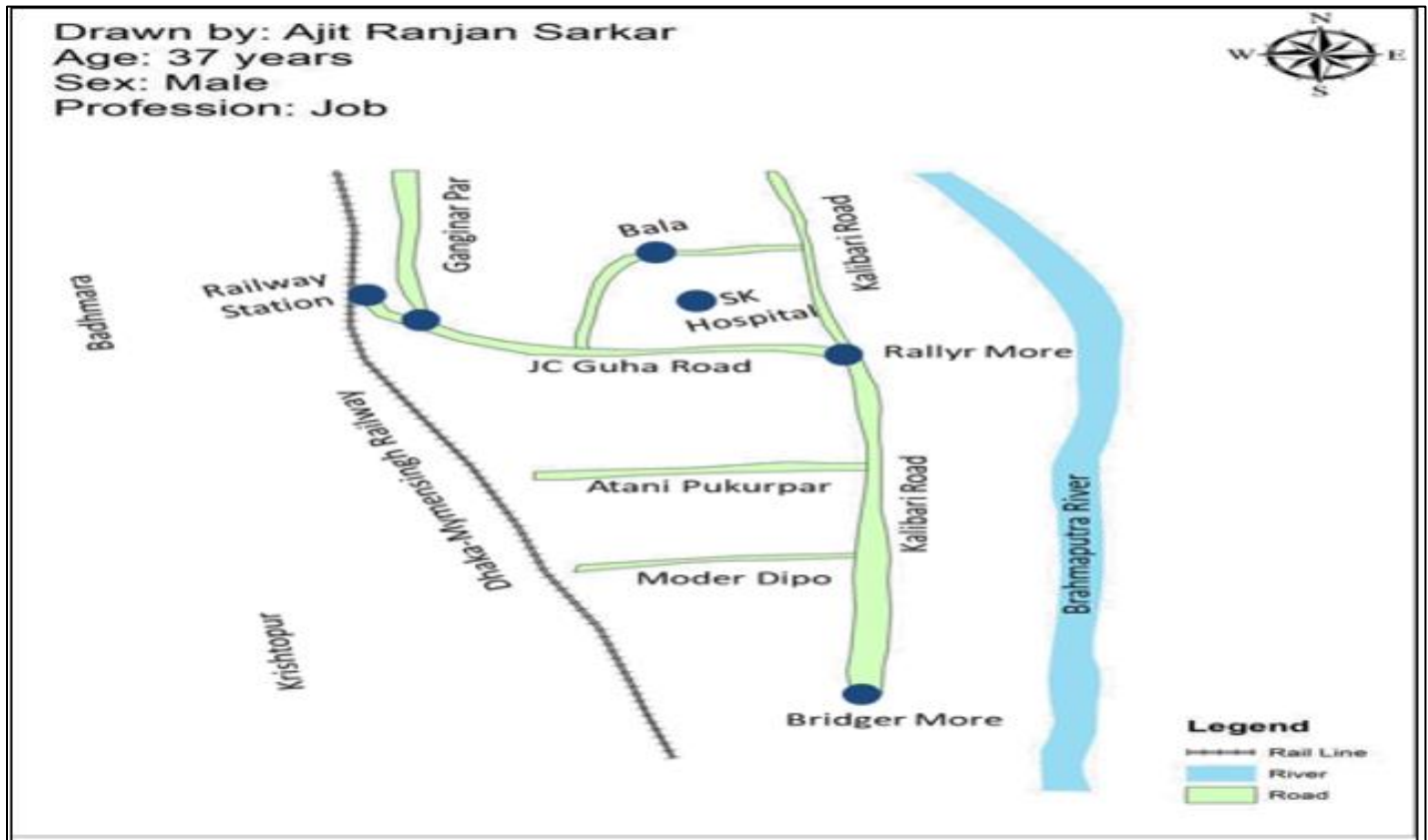


Fig 5: Composite Mental Map of Mymensingh Town
Source: Field Survey, 2015

Mental maps express the spatial practices through which inhabitant’s subjective reality, placing emphasis on objects, come to light. Individual mental image is, thus, transformed to spatial image (Carter 1982). Aggregation of individual images would define a possible or city Image (Camona et al. 2006).

This is how the composite mental map of Mymensingh town is prepared and presented in Figure 5. Not all mental maps of 341 samples are useful. Finally, 100 mental maps are found functional. The mental maps have been put in GIS (Geographic Information System) data base according to the address of the respondents. The aggregate of individual mental map is thus produces composite mental maps presented in Figure 5. This also reveals the objects which is felt important by people and which people use in their daily life. The composite mental map establishes mental bond with physical object. According to Figure 5 it is found that 35% mental space falls into commercial land use. It is important to express that grocery shop and kitchen market are main mental space under commercial land use. Education mainly kindergarten and primary school, health, recreation like going to park and socio-cultural including mosque, temple etc., have also been important for the respondents. Land uses like administration mainly government offices and urban services including police station and post office are felt to be less important. Accept administration and

urban services other land uses fall into fulfillment of basic needs of human beings.

V. PATTERN IN RESULTED SOCIAL SPACE IN MYMENSINGH TOWN

Social space is such a place where human needs and demand can coincide. It encourages human interactions as appropriate physical and mental environments co-exist. It depends on the socio-economic condition of the inhabitants of Mymenisngh town. The production of social space is a continuous process.

A. Delineation of Social Space/Public Space

According to the definition, social space is an area where physical and mental space intersects within an existing social system. Figure 6 reveals the common points where physical space and mental space intersects. Thirty four social spaces, mentally accepted by the users, have been identified through their easy accessibility, mental attachment, and use value. Thus, Bangladesh Agriculture University becomes the recreational space like Circuit House Park. The important intersections of the town like Charpara mor, Ganginarpar mor, Shambuganj mor, Rally mor etc. have been transformed into the social space.

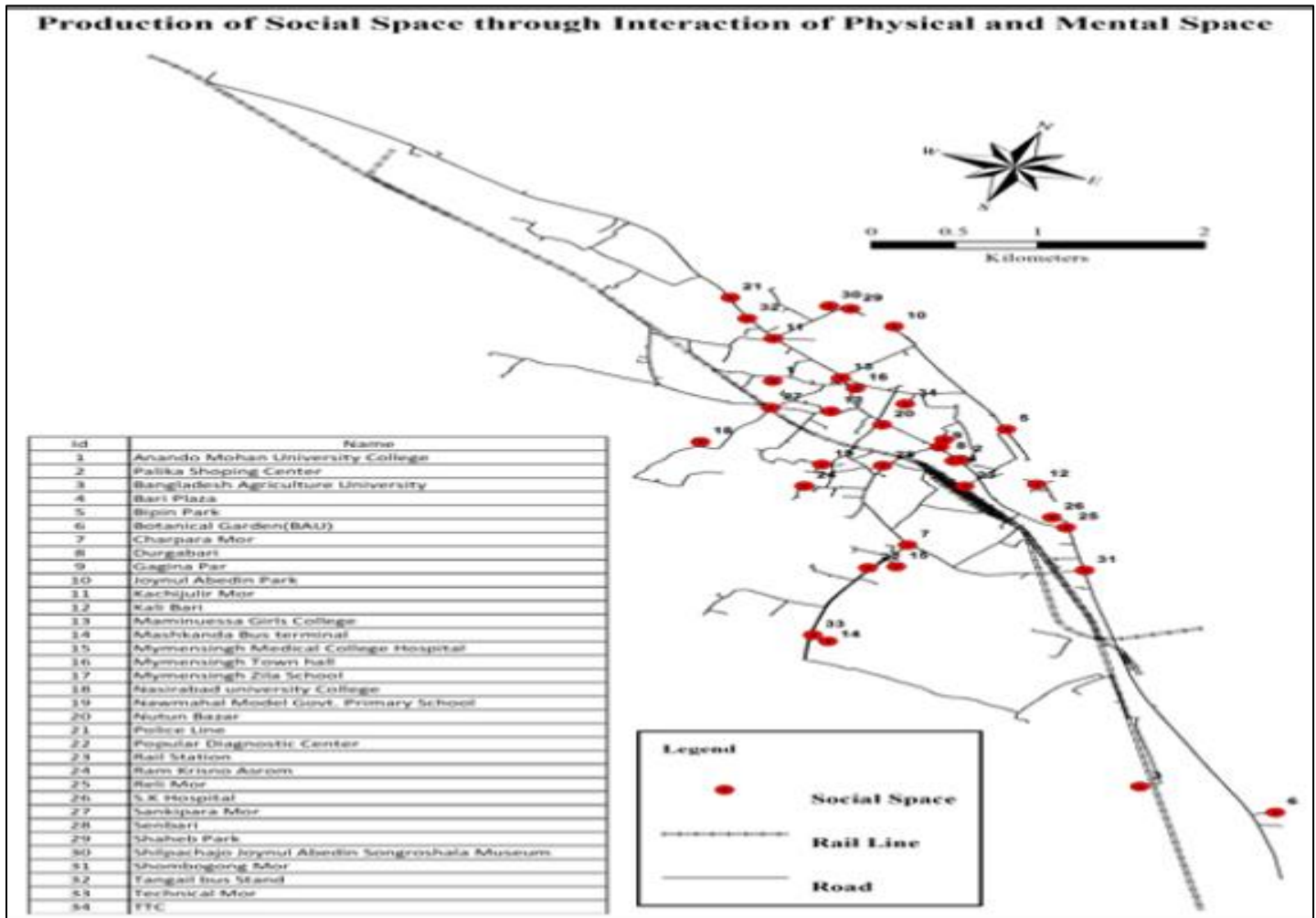


Fig 6: Social Space of Mymensingh Town
Source: Author, 2015

It is clear that inhabitants and users have the power to convert the same mental space into social space with cultural practice. These social spaces can be used as public spaces too.

B. Cultural Festival

Culture is associated with human mind. Mind is spatially oriented. Cultural events have the power to develop an emotional bond between mind and space. Here roads play an important role in expressing human feelings and emotion.

➤ **Bengali New Year (Phohela Baishakh)**

One of the important festivals in Bangladesh is the celebration of Phohela Baishakh (14th April)- the first day of Bengali new year. The day of Chaitra-sangkranti (15th March to 13th April) is observed to bid farewell to the previous year. Though it has originated from rural society, it has now become cosmopolitan festival. Its non-secular character paves the way

to participate all sections of people in celebrating programs associated with this day.

A grand rally shown in Figure 7 with colorful banner and dresses, festoons, masks, music etc. known as “Mongol Shovajatra” composed of high officials, civil society, and mass people starts from “Mukul Niketon School.” The rally passes through main town center and reaches at “Baishaki Chatter (square)” in Jainul Abedin Park represented in Figure 8. It is important to express that the rally touches social spaces marked by Id 9, 16, 20 and finally reaches at Id 10 as shown in Figure 6. Afterwards, a day long program takes place in the park including Baishaki fair. Like other fairs, the Baishakhi fair also has two aspects, one commercial, and the other cultural. Businessmen open their book of accounts (Halkhata) on the occasion of Chaitra-sankranti and the first day of Baishakh and Baishakhi fair are launched on the occasion.



Fig 7: Mongol Shovajatra Rally
Source: Author, 2015

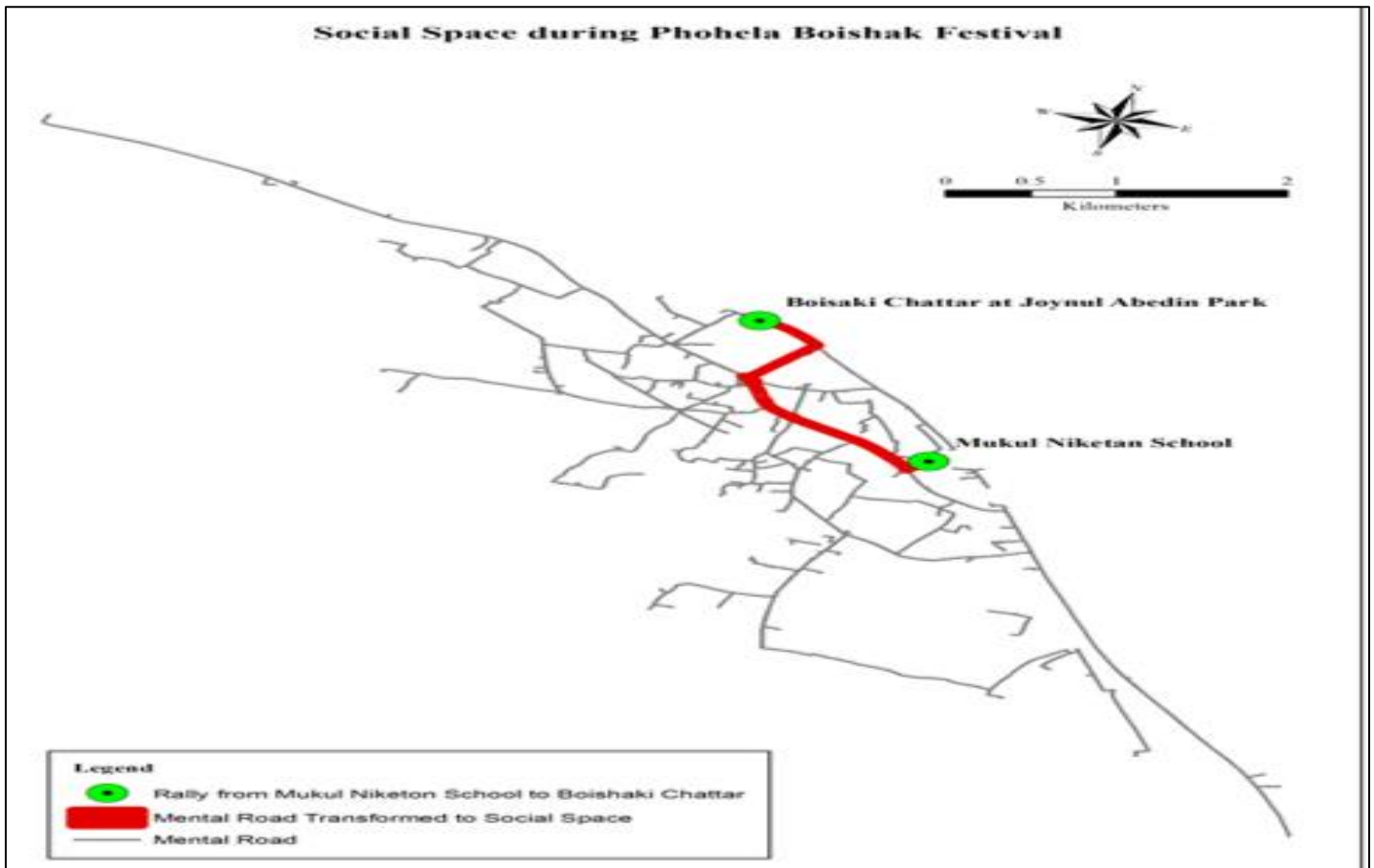


Fig 8: Roads Transform as Representationl Space
Source: Author, 2015

➤ *International Mother Language Day*

The day is observed to homage the martyr, who sacrifices their life for establishment the right of “Bangla” as mother language instead of “Urdu” protesting cultural hegemony of West Pakistani ruler of 21st February, 1952. The whole nation

observes the day with great enthusiasm. The day is not only observed in the country but also all over the world. It is now a global space. The inhabitants of Mymensingh town observes this day with great respect.

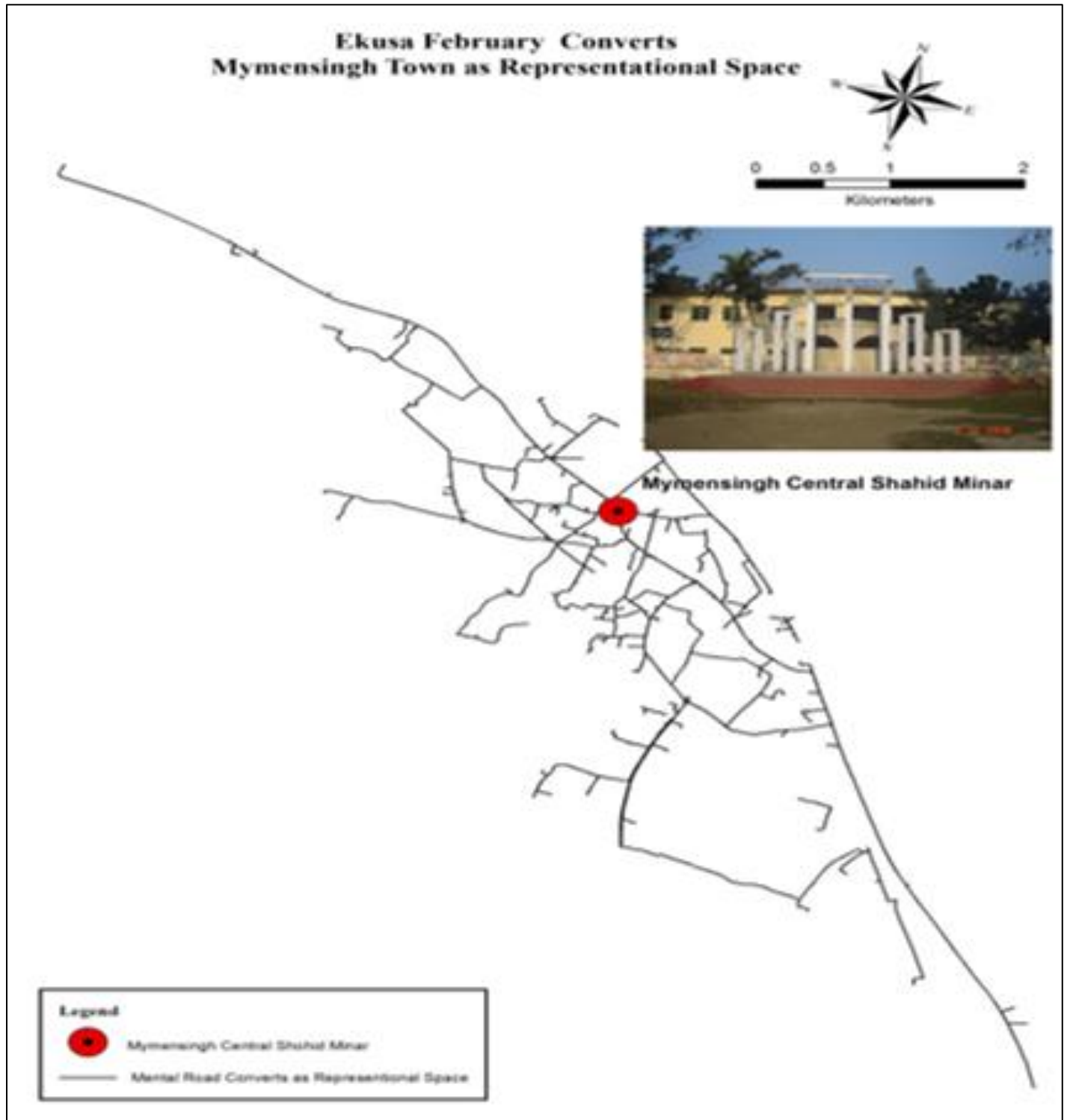


Fig 9: Shahid Minar Acts as Symbolic Space
Source: Author, 2015

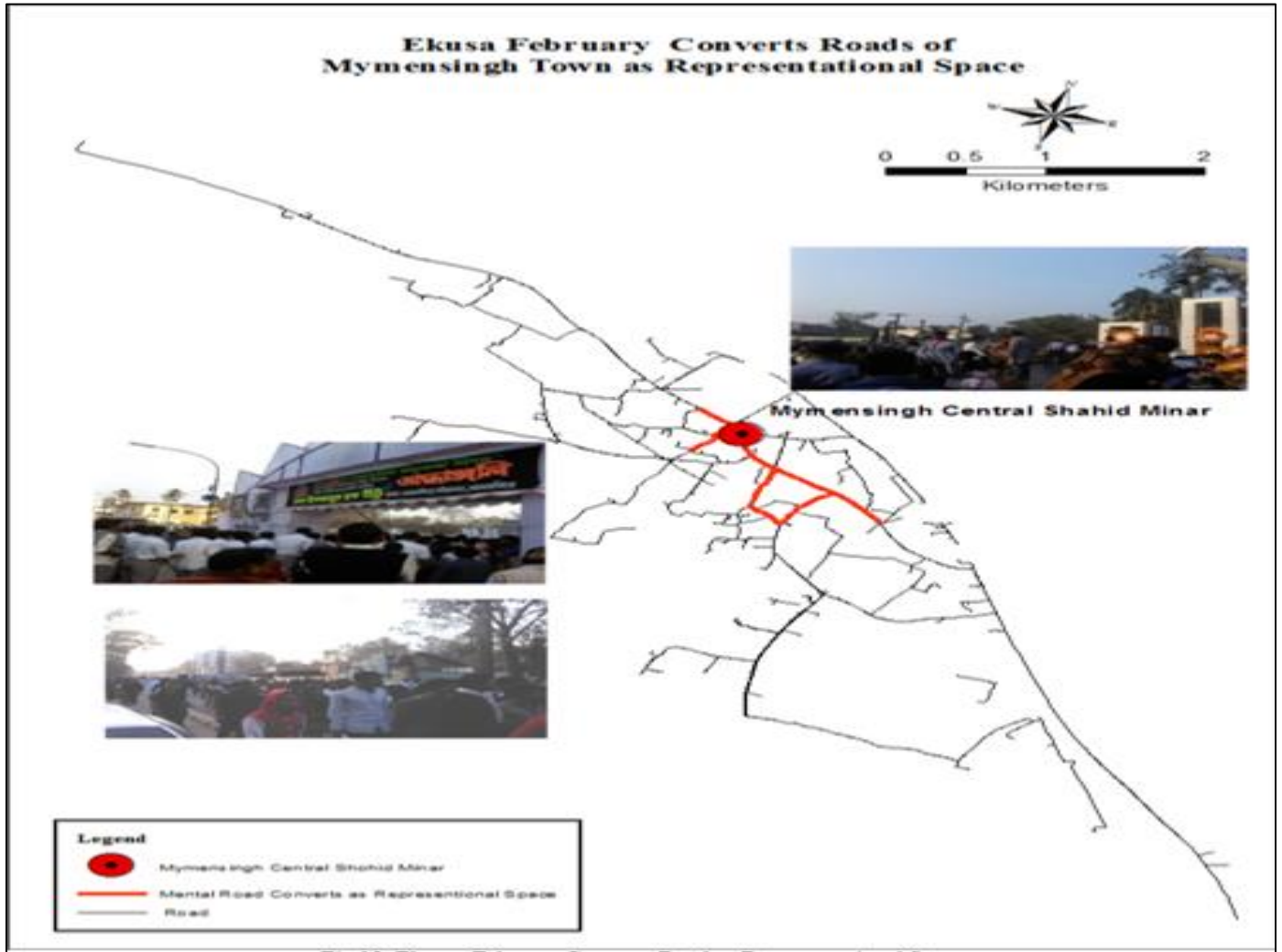


Fig 10: Ekusay February Converts Road as Representational Space
 Source: Author, 2015

Shahid Minar shown in Figure 9 has such a power that blends people with space as in Figure 10. Shahid Minar is the part of Mymensingh Town Hall marked with Id 16 as social space in Figure 6. As a result, planned space transforms into social space. History associated with emotion and values

becomes the part of culture that transforms abstract labour to social labour. Important roads of the town become the symbolic. Shahid Minar, now a day, is used as cultural phenomenon as in Figure 11.



Fig 11: Shahid Minar as a Platform of Cultural Activities

Source: Author, 2015

C. Religious Festival

Religion acts as the part of ritual. It is transformed as a part of culture while being used as festival. Holy Eid, Sharbojonin Durga Puja and Astami Snan are the popular religious festivals in Mymensingh town.

➤ Holy Eid

There are two religious festivals in Islam: Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. Eid Al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan (a month of fasting during daylight hours), and Muslims usually give zakat (charity) on the occasion.

Eid al-Adha ("Festival of the Sacrifice"), also called the "Sacrifice Feast," is the second of two Muslim holidays celebrated worldwide each year, and considered the holier of the two. Eid Al-Adha is celebrated on the tenth day of Dhu al-Hijjah (a pilgrimage to Mecca) and lasts for three days, during which Muslims usually sacrifice a sheep and distribute its meat in 3 parts: among family, friends, and the poor.

Like Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha begins with a prayer at Eid Ghas represented in Figure 12 (place for offering prayer) of two rakats followed by a sermon (khutbah).

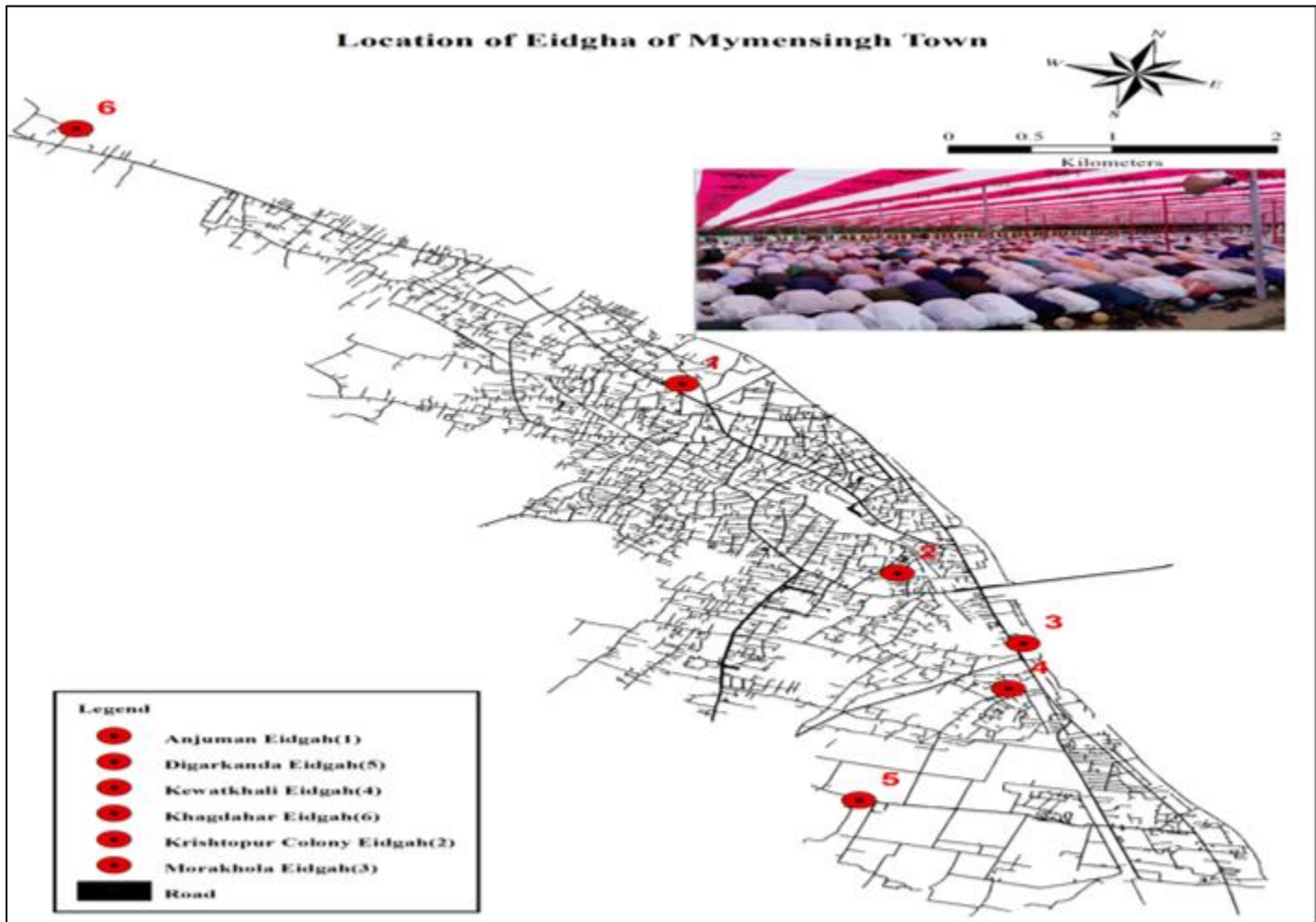


Fig 12: Location of Eidgha of Mymensingh Town
Source: Author, 2015

➤ *Sharbojonin Durga Puja and Astami Snan*

The biggest religious festival of the Hindu religion is Durga (Goddess) Puja (is a prayer ritual performed by Hindus to host, honor and worship one or more deities, or to spiritually celebrate an event). Durga Puja has its root in crops and soil. Durga resembles to crops, soil, fertility, and prosperity. Mass people who worship the god during the harvesting time in the month “Shorot” (autumn) is known as Durga (Mamun 1994).

The occasion takes place in the temples in Mymensingh town. The festival holds the neighboring areas and turns them as lived. The whole town center area represented in Figure 14 endows with subjective orientation.

The ritual of 'Astami Snan' (holy dip) is another path of the Hindu to make themselves free from sin. The event takes place in the Brahmaputra river where thousands of people from six districts of greater Mymensingh and other areas join in the process. After worshipping the “sun,” they take bath in the river. The Brahmaputra river turns into a representational space

shown in Figure 13. The daily life rhythm is traversed by natural rhythm of life.



Fig 13: Astami Snan in the Brahmaputra River
Source: The Daily Sabuj (2015), “The holy dip”, 1 April, p.3.

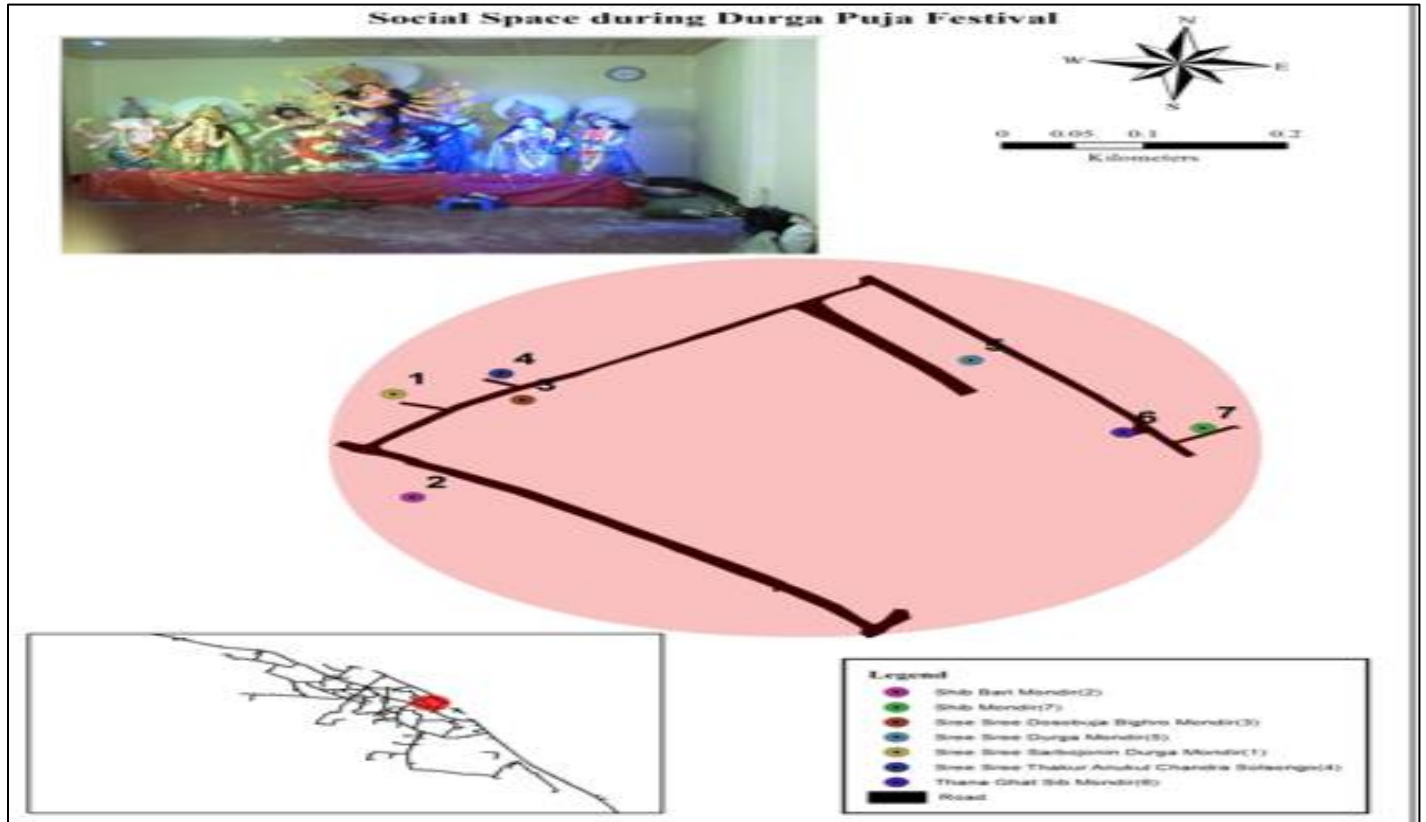


Fig 14: Town Centre Area Traverses with Festivity
Source: Author, 2015

D. Production of Contradictory Space

Space that shows opposite character to normal activities can be known as contradictory space. It has already been mentioned that a collective body is formed during festivals. Such a collective body is a sign of brotherhood, unity, and cohesion. But it has a reverse side which manifests through

aggression and conflict associated to power and ideology represented in Figure 15. Such activities are contradictory to the existing spatial code. Thus Lefebvre (1991, p.73) expresses that ‘social space is what permits fresh actions [not day to day activities] to occur’.



Fig 15: Body Occupy in Space
Source: The Daily Sodesh Songbad (2015), “Political turmoil,” 30 January, pp.2, 3&5.

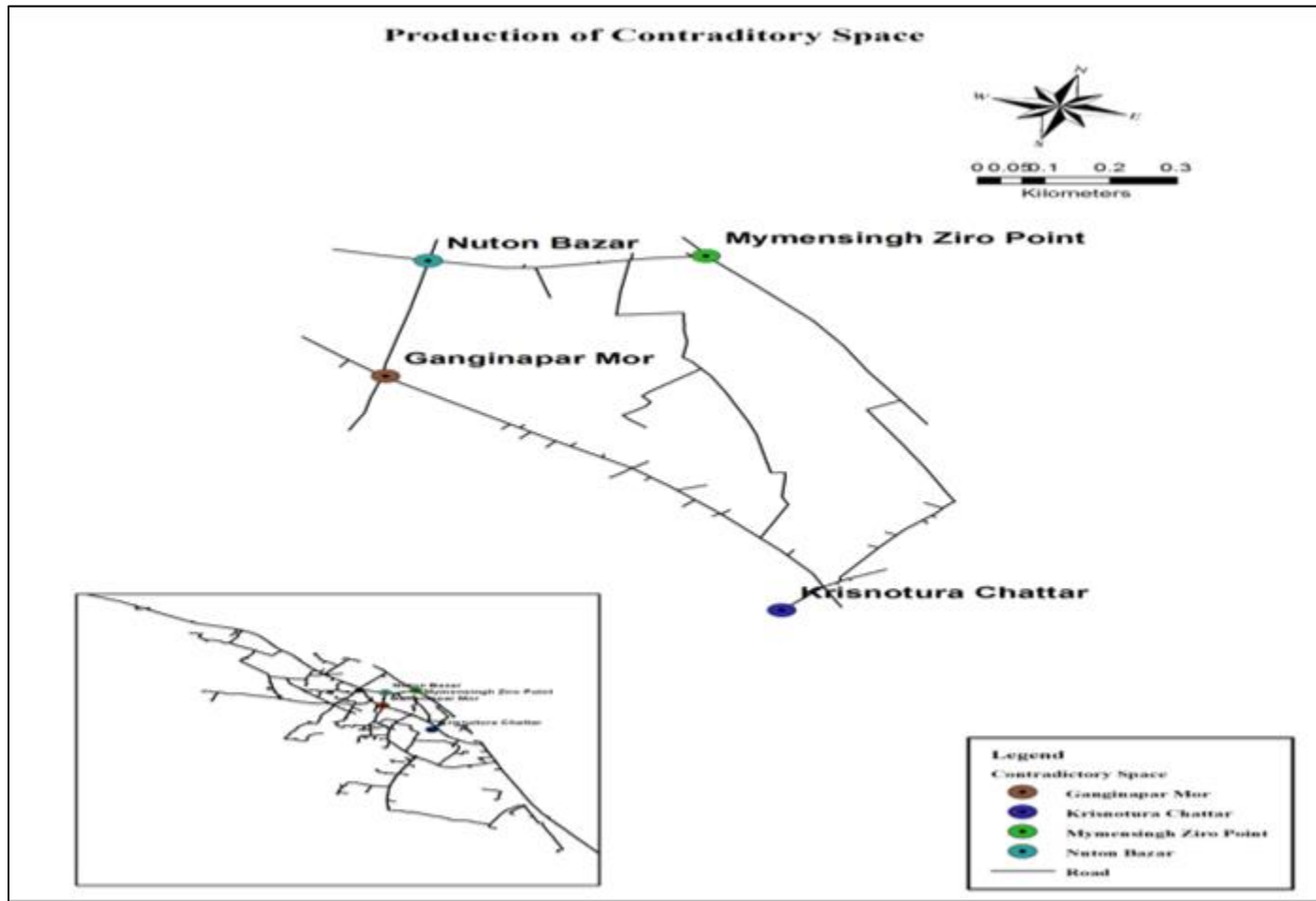


Fig 16: Locus of Contradictory Space
Source: Author, 2015

According to local newspaper and police station, intersections and roads shown in Figure 16 play an important role in holding people emotion, aspiration, value of a particular group and class instead of logic. These locations are mainly located at the central part of the town where main commercial activities take place including rail station beside krisnotura (a kind of flowering tree) Chatter (square). Roads play important role in communication for all kinds of activities. Contradictory activities in these locations can paralyze the smooth functions of Mymensingh town.

E. Contingency Plan

Contingency plan is an emergency management tool before any disasters take place. It is evident that It is a natural tendency of people to take the habituated roads to cater the daily uses. The probability of using the same road in case of emergency is high as well. It has already been demarcated the mental road people use their daily life. Mymensingh town is vulnerable to earthquake. It requires to define space where people can assemble during any emergency situation. In selecting those sites, social spaces are likely to be more acceptable and successful. It is revealed from Figure 6 that there are twenty two social spaces of which twenty four social spaces such as school, college, temple, park etc. which can be used as emergency shelter center as in Figure 17. The roads served as mental space can be used as rescue operation during emergency such as earthquake, fire incident etc.

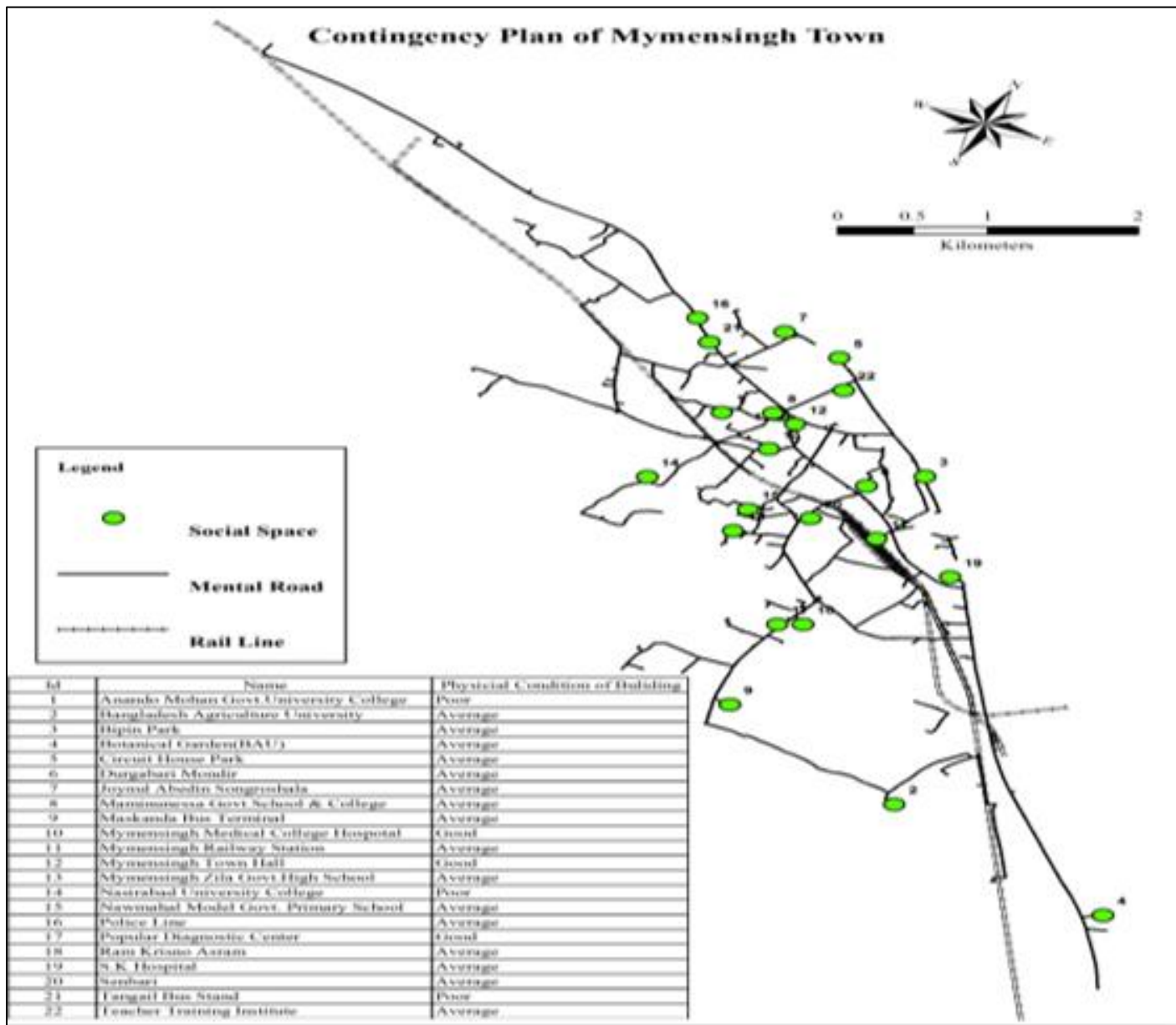


Fig 17: Mental Map as a Basis of Contingency Plan

Source: Author, 2015

F. Prevention of Social Pathology

Like other towns of Bangladesh Mymensingh town is experiencing crimes in different natures. Crimes, of course, are time and space related. Crime data for last three years have been presented in following Figure 18. Out of 318 reported crimes 156 numbers of crimes have been taken place in social space whereas 128 numbers of crimes have been associated with

abstract space. The nature of crimes associated to both social and abstract space is similar. An association between crime spot and mental space has been explored. It is seen that most of the crimes occur in same mental space. It is an interesting finding from Figure 18 that crimes usually do not occur in those social spaces having no mental space.

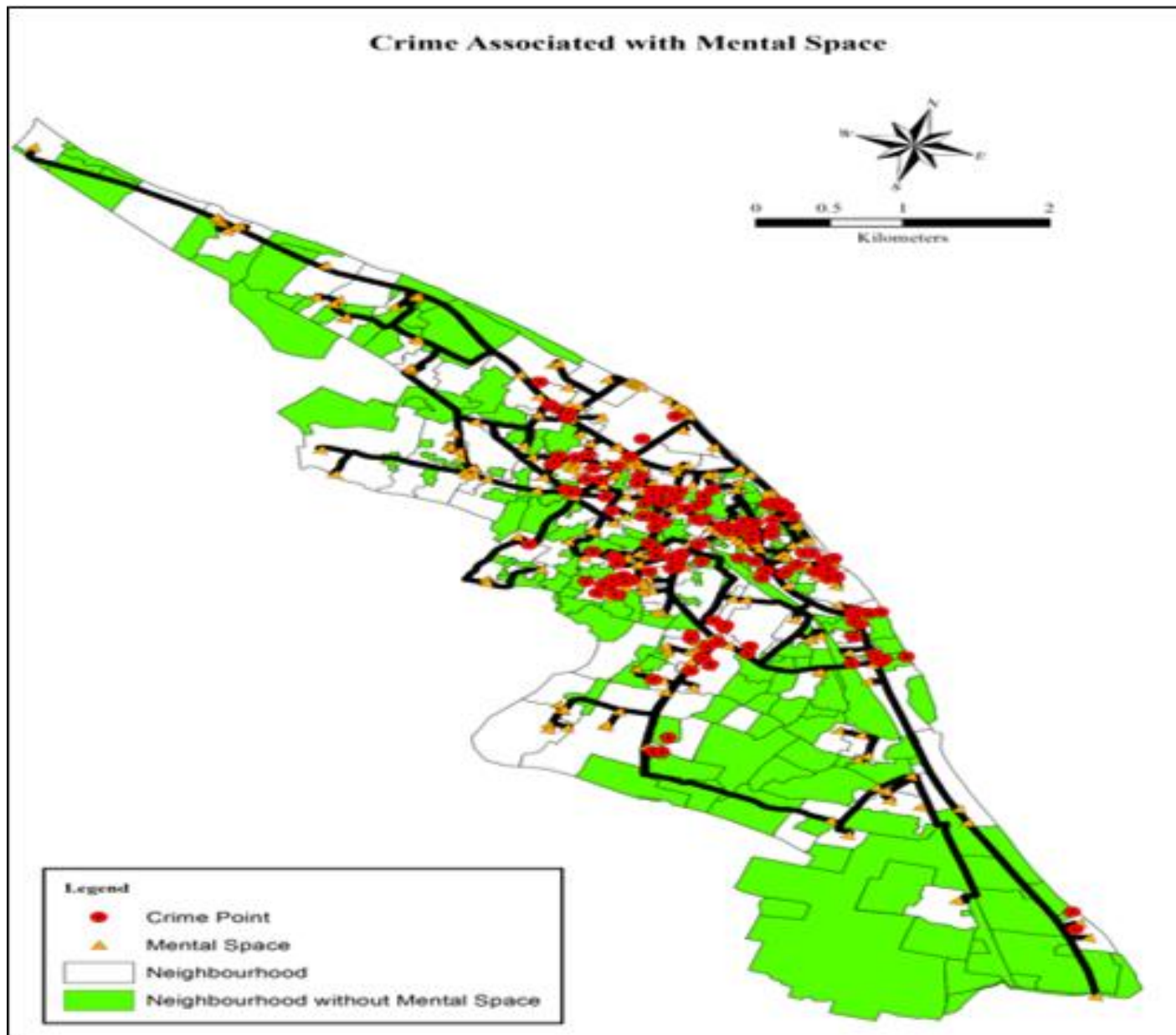


Fig 18: Relationship Crimes with Social Space
Source: Author, 2105

G. Social Space as Planning Unit

Social space is produced and reproduced according to the interaction of physical and mental space where body and mind play a crucial role within a cultural framework. Stamp (1998, p.209) agrees that '[s]ocial and cultural processes inscribe the body with meanings and the body, which is always more than these meanings, projects its realities into social spaces'. This means that the study of production of spacer can succeed if physical, mental and social levels are considered. Above all,

Butimer (1969) has shown that many individuals have thresholds beyond which they are reluctant to travel for the 'unknown' element becomes large enough to cause them tension or frustration. It is currently practiced in planning to use 'ward' (political boundary) of the town as planning unit. But people live in neighbourhoods where physical and mental space intersects. In order to make pro-people oriented planning neighbourhoods as social space need to be used as planning unit.

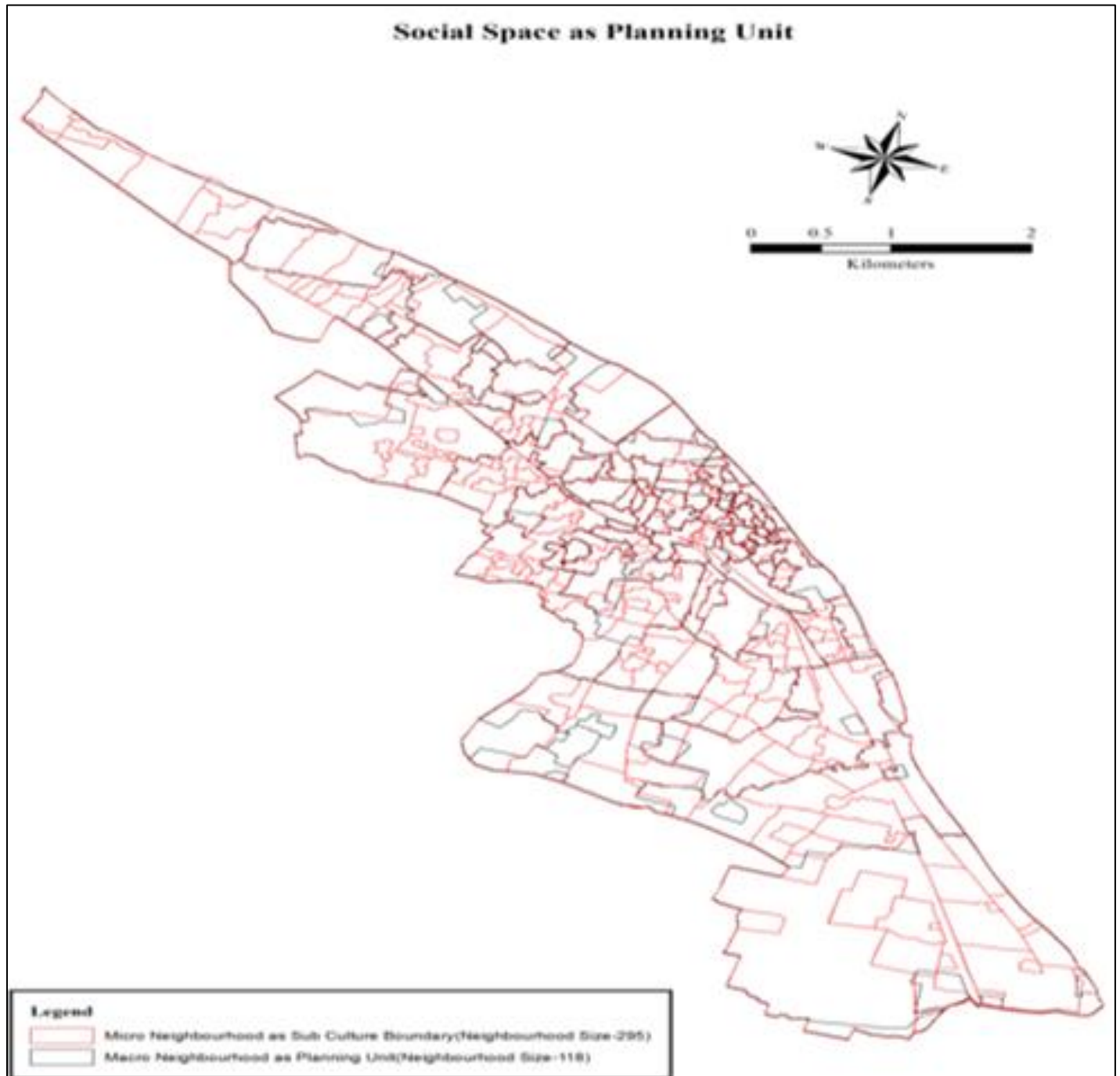


Fig 19: Neighborhoods as Planning Unit

Source: Author, 2105

Within such a framework, it is clear that standard of services for neighbourhoods must be realistic. Mymensingh town consists into 118 macro neighbourhoods and these are fragmented into 295 micro neighborhoods shown in Figure 19. Although some macro neighbourhoods are smaller than the micro neighbourhoods people holds and preserve their forefather’s sentiment, emotion and orientation and still consider them this way. Hence, the micro neighbourhoods are

here considered as sub culture boundary and the macro neighbourhoods will act as planning unit where physical and mental space interact with each other. The required services for the neighbourhoods have been identified from the field survey and secondary sources. The services like grocery shop, mosque, temple, kindergarten school, primary school, high school, bazar (kitchens market), and open space have been identified for the present context.

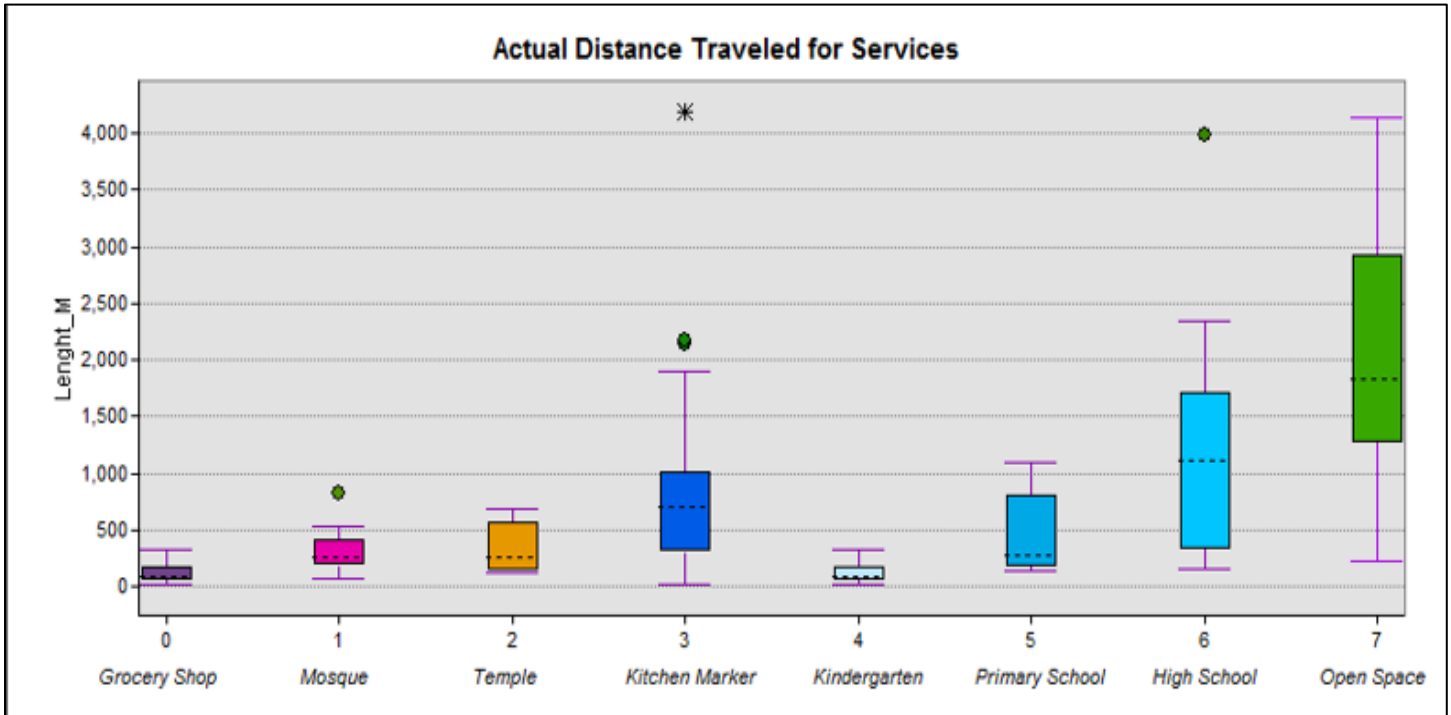


Fig 20: Actual Distance Travelled for Services
Source: Author, 2105

The proposed distance time in Figure 21 is based on the actual distance people cover to avail services shown in Figure 20. The different distances have been identified from mental maps.

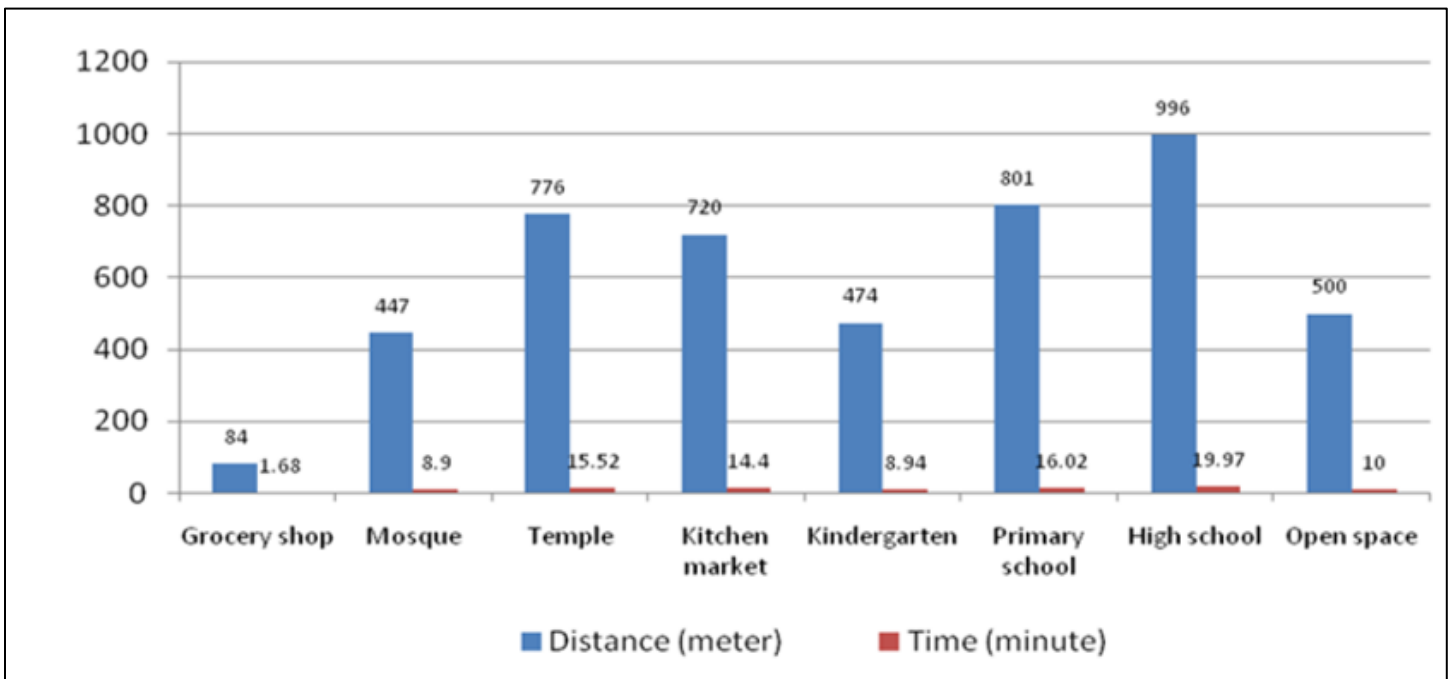


Fig 21: Proposed Distance-Time Standard for Services
Source: Author, 2015

VI. APPLICATION OF SOCIAL SPACE IN PHYSICAL PLANNING

‘The process of physical planning was fairly simplistic until the 1960s’ (Rahman 2008, p.27). Tanvir (2106, p. 62) describes that ‘the method of planning is commonly referred to as top down process. Planners were given opportunities to conceive a vision for utopian cities’. The traditional idea of the planning process was described by Sir Patrick Geddes as a sequence of ‘Survey - Analysis -Plan’. Later from time to time, this approach has been modified rather than replaced. Now the process is identified as a cyclic sequential process (Rahman 2008). Roberts (1974, p.55) summarizes that:

[d]espite talk of ‘feedback’ and ‘cycles’ it remains essentially an unintegrated process. The links between different stages of the process are

not explicit and the whole approach is not in accord with the thought processes (most likely to solve problems).

Figure 22 gives a conceptual idea on sequence of tasks of physical planning process. The diagram illustrates two kinds of balance in the planning process. If the diagram is divided into two halves in top and bottom direction, the top half emphasizes on the demand issue of land from locational and space requirement aspect. The bottom half analyses the supply aspect of land in terms of locational needs and holding capacity of suitable land. A second balance is visible between the left and right side of the diagram. Tasks on the right side constitute locational analysis (both demand and supply). Task on the right, analyse space quantities (again both demand and supply). Task 5 is the most important part dealing with synthesizing or balancing location with space quantity consideration.

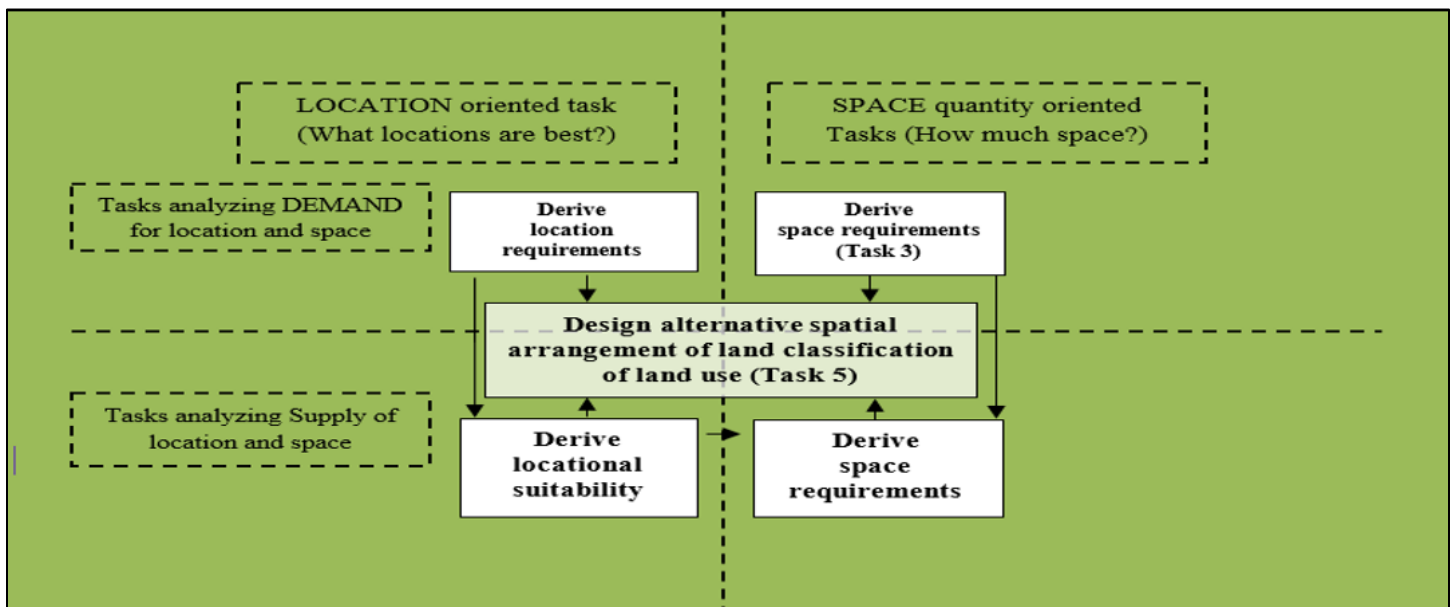


Fig 22: Physical Planning Process

Source: Kaiser, E. J., Godschalk, D.R. & Chaplin, F.S. (1995)

The approach is physical in nature. Human mental and social dimension have not been emphasized properly. They have been considered as passive object of representation of space- conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub dividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent - all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived (Lefebvre 1991). The representation of space faces the challenge as

[f]luctuations in the use of measures, and thus in representations of space, parallel general history and indicate the direction it has taken – to wit, it trends towards the quantitative, towards homogeneity and towards the elimination of the

body. Representations of space are certainly abstract, ... established relations between objects and people in represented space are subordinate to a logic which will sooner or later break them up because of their consistency (Lefebvre 1991, pp.41&111).

Design and planning professionals have long been influenced by the belief in physically and spatially deterministic power over people and environment. This outlook often prevents designers from engaging critically with culture, through representational space and spatial practice as a crucial, possibly the most crucial aspect in the design process (Garret & Maheffey 2016).

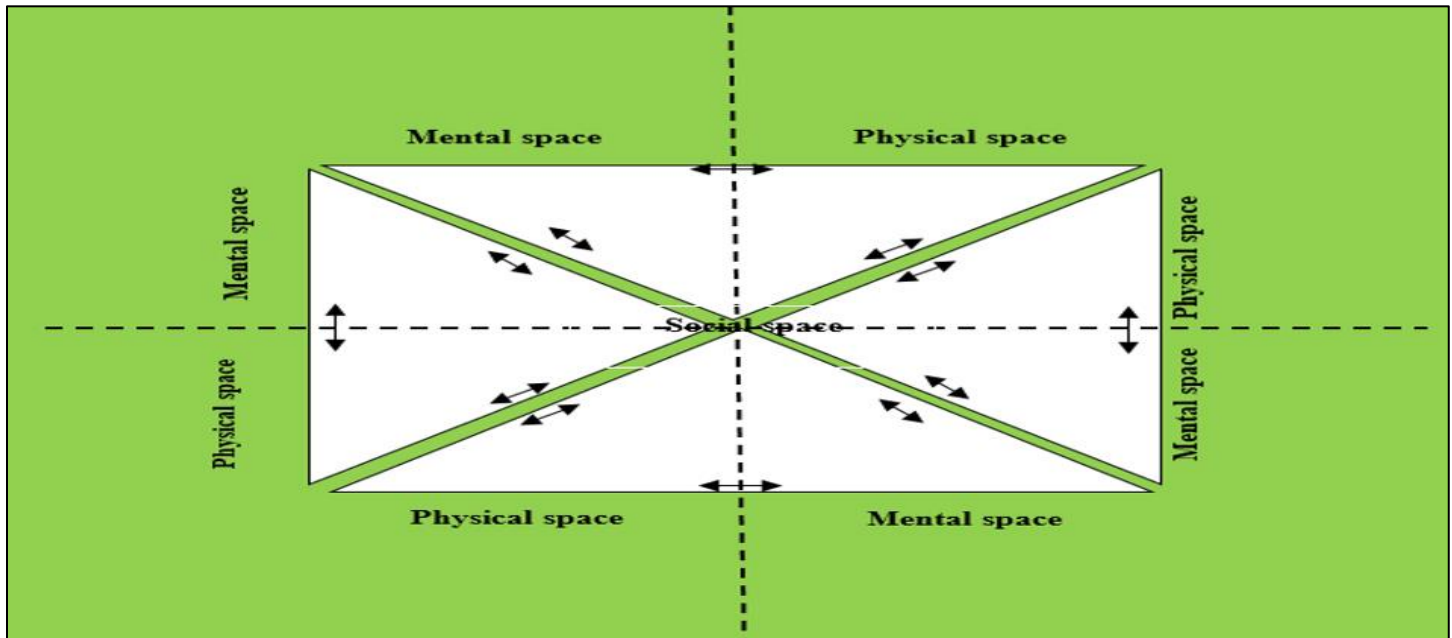


Fig 23: The Process of Integration of Social Space into Physical Planning Process

Source: Author, 2105

Even if planners disregard the social aspects, purely physical town planning inevitably has effects on people's daily existence through the way in which they encounter the built environment in their daily lives, and can worsen their quality of life (Greed 1996). But planning is an activity concerned with making choices about future options involving improvement in quality of life of the people (Rahman 2008). Therefore, there is wide scope for public participation in city planning and development activities carried out by the local authorities to ensure sustainable city development, the master plans of the most of the cities have witnessed for lack of public participation (Enyedi 2004). Social space is user and inhabitant's space and certainly qualitative (Lefebvre 1991). So 'the hard infrastructure of the neighbourhood should be designed in such a way that they are concerned with the "soft infrastructure" of everyday life' (Ahsan 2009, p. 33).

For the reasons, there is a pressing demand to mitigate the gap of the physical planning process. Lefebvre's spatial triad presented in Figure 1 can easily be integrated with Figure 22 in following way. The triad has been put in four parts of two axes like in Figure 23. Finally, Figure 22 and Figure 23 have been joined together in Figure 24.

The planning process is, now in Figure 24 an integrated one as mental and social aspect blends with physical dimension of space in which human beings are in the center of the physical planning process.

Space has physical, mental, and social dimensions. But in current physical planning process only physical space is so far considered in solving problems. One of the important reasons is that:

[m]any planners work primarily in the office, on the phone, and in meeting rooms. Perhaps they rely on windshield surveys to get a better idea of the planning site than allowed by site plans, statistics, yet site-specific information derived from direct experience derived from direct experience of the site and its social and spatial context cannot be conveyed by other means. (Carp 2004, p. 244)

The way the country's urbanization and urban areas are growing: its planning practices have not grown matching with urban growth. Those who are living in cities, their souls are tied with rural areas. Most of the urban people prefer to be identified with rural identities. The tradition of arranging cities and towns as the citizen's ultimate destination has not yet been the tradition of the people. Majority of urban population, they have traditionally been accorded very low importance and bear minimal influence on urban planning process (Nazem 2013). Rahman (2007, p.22) confirms that 'the planning process is incomplete'. It is now being widely known that 'the implementation of the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of Dhaka, capital city of Bangladesh, is a complete failure' (Mawla 2016, p.11). Planning is a continuous process. It is indeed important to reveal mental space during survey stage and blend with physical space to accomplish social space. Application of social space in planning process will prove worthy as it relates people with space.

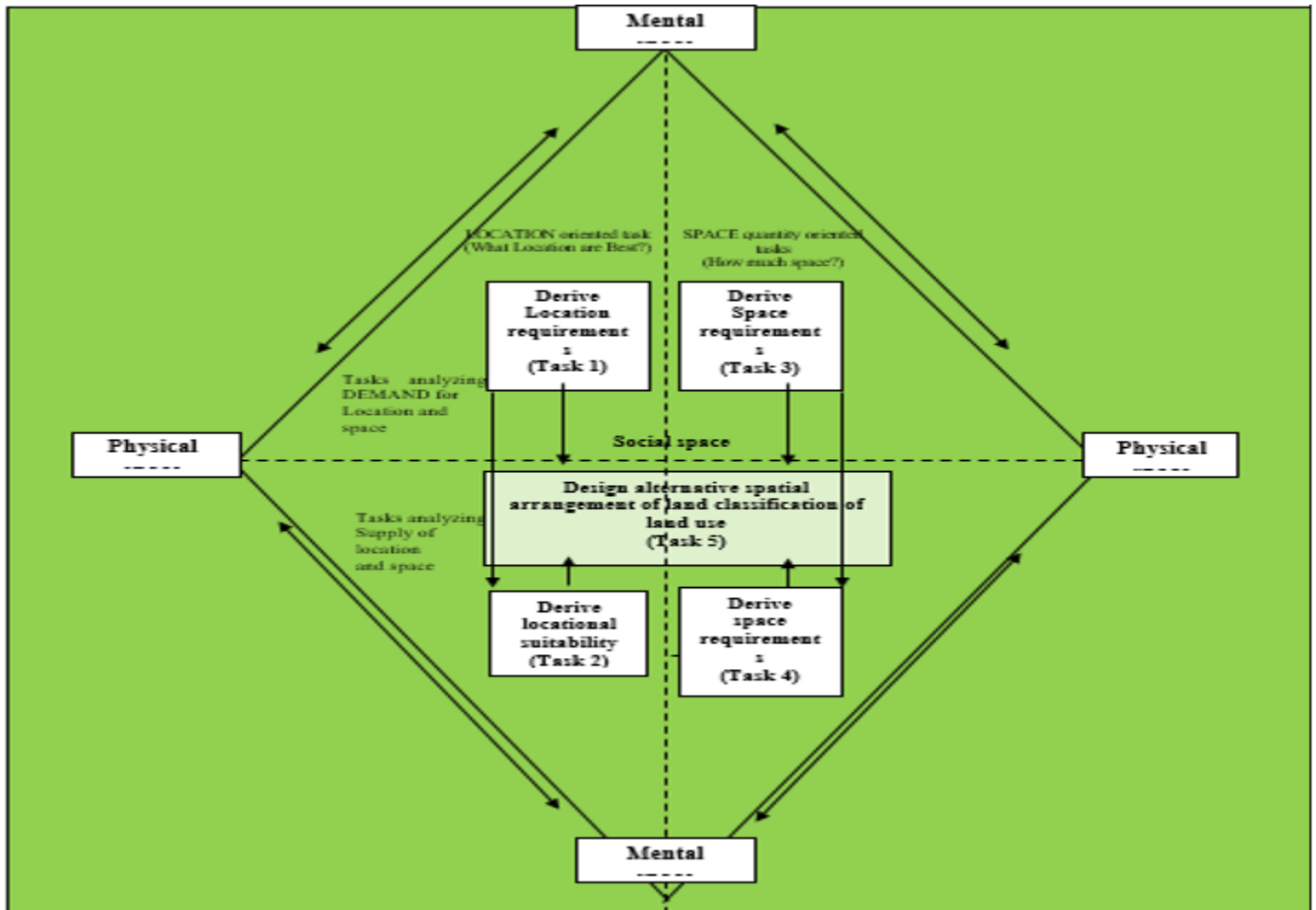


Fig 24: Integrated Physical Planning Process

VII. CONCLUSION

Physical planning aims at development not only in economic realm but also in unlocking the human potentiality. Thus, mere physical understanding of space only subsumes uses and excludes spatial practice of the society which ultimately fails to incorporate people and their social space in the planning process. Social space approach helps in resolving the vacuum between practioners and users. This unfolds the dynamic nature of space which is believed to be the appropriate tool to intervene in specific arena be it physical, mental or social. The trialectic interaction among the elements of social space can make a physical plan lived and pro people oriented.

Human being is incomplete if not being considered physical and mental together. Above all, he is the product of society based on mode of production. Space is the mirror of how society is organized with complex physical and mental relationship. Thus the consideration of physical space is only represents the partial reality of the society. Its mental space let alone social space are so far neglected. Planning is known to be a balancing activity between demand and supply. Here human

needs are completely ignored. It is high time to combine mental space with physical space to synthesise need with demand. Then planning will be considered for the people, with the people and by the people.

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