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Impact of Globalisation on Religious Tourism: The Case of Vrindavan, India

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The term 'religious tourism' refers to travel that is primarily inspired by spiritual beliefs (Smith, 2012). It serves as one of humanity's oldest religious practices as well as one of the earliest examples of tourism (Timothy, 2011). Due in the main to the numerous sacred places that are dispersed throughout its vast geographic area, India, which is known for its rich heritage and culture, has attracted attention from throughout the world (Eck, 2011; Singh, 2013). As a result, it has become a well-known location for religious tourism. During the past ten years, this specific type of tourism has seen a tremendous increase in growth rates, leading to considerable changes at important spiritual and religious places. Intense globalisation and rapid urbanisation have been prompted by the influx of tourists and pilgrims, profoundly altering the terrain (Harris, Griffin & Williams, 2002).

This paper delves into this phenomenon through a case study of Vrindavan, a significant city situated on the banks of the Yamuna River in northern India, which has held great religious significance and serves as a prominent pilgrimage destination (Shinde, 2011). However, as part of a larger process of globalisation and ensuing urbanisation, and the entry of numerous transnational chains starting in the 1960s, there have been significant changes. The idea of a pilgrimage to Vrindavan has changed, moving away from its original meaning as a trek to the home of the gods and instead becoming more of a holiday and leisure destination. This change has produced exciting opportunities for investors and developers, prompting growing urbanisation and a notable break from the customary pilgrimage practices that were traditionally observed.

The study examines the ways in which globalisation influences the establishment of new sacred places supported by various faith-based organisations by using a case study approach and a purposive survey method (Kothari, 2004). Considering the concomitant processes of religious commercialisation and spatial transformation, the article seeks to shed light on the consequent impact on the spiritual experience and the larger pilgrimage patterns throughout the city. The study ends by making suggestions for steps that can be taken to lessen the effect of globalisation on a city's spiritual essence and make sure that urban growth is in harmony with its history and sacred values.

Key Words: religious tourism, globalisation, religious commodification, pilgrimage patterns, spatial transformation

Introduction

Religious Tourism

Travel is frequently sparked by religion and spirituality, which inspire people to set out on excursions in search of divine encounters. The development of many well-known tourist locations can be primarily explained by their profound ties to revered people, holy places, and important historical events (Norman, 2008) . Historically, religion and tourism have been closely related, and travelling with a religious purpose has been a major form of mobility since the dawn of time (Moaven *et al.*, 2017). Religious tourism comprises of contemporary patterns of tourism to sacred sites and pilgrimage destinations, where visitors seek both religious and recreational experiences. The word pilgrimage usually conjures up images of travellers undertaking long arduous journeys to religious shrines around the world (Kaelber, 2006). In fact, this form of tourism has existed long before the Bible was written. In the recent decades, there had been

a considerable surge in religious tourism, regardless of religious or spiritual vision (Katz, 2011). Due to their spiritual or religious significance, many revered locations around the world, including the magnificent *Angkor Wat* in *Cambodia*, sacred mountains in *Japan*, tranquil Buddhist temples in *South Korea*, and various holy sites in India, have become extremely popular as sought-after tourist attractions.

From historical times, these pilgrimage journeys have been a source of various economic activities. Indeed, the growing popularity of spiritual and religious tourism is evidenced by the statistics published by First UNWTO International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development which recognised religious tourism as one of the fastest growing segments within the travel industry (UNWTO, 2013). Around the world, there are about 600 million national and international religious excursions, with Europe hosting 40% of these visitors (300–330 million annually, according to UNWTO estimates). In addition to attracting tourists from all over the world and boosting local economies, religious historical sites serve as significant gathering places for locals and tourists alike, fostering an atmosphere of acceptance, humility, and understanding of one another's cultural backgrounds Tourism can protect and promote religious heritage (UNWTO, 2014).

Religiously or spiritually motivated travel has become widespread and popularised in recent decades, occupying an important segment of international tourism, having grown substantially in recent years both in proportional and absolute terms (Olsen, 2006). Tourism systems and the accompanying markets have been the subject of extensive investigation in the past. However, until today, the topic of religious tourism has not been thoroughly examined. Scholars, governments, and tourism organisations have only recently started to notice the rise in religiously motivated travel and the ensuing rise in pilgrimages to holy places. This development is consistent with the general rise in cultural and heritage tourism, which supports the development of religious tourism (Digance, 2006).

Exploring the Convergence of Religious Tourism and Globalisation

The convergence of religious tourism and globalisation refers to the ways in which the global flow of people, ideas, and cultures is shaping the way that religious tourism is experienced and understood. Globalisation has led to increased mobility and interconnectedness, making it easier for people to travel to sacred sites around the world. As a result, religious tourism has become a global phenomenon, with people from different cultures and backgrounds coming together at these sites. Religions and cultures across the globe have been profoundly affected by *globalisation* which is also referred to as the *Third Industrial Revolution* (Woodley, 2015). Despite the presence of corporatism, global monopolies, financial regulation, military fragmentation, and capitalism, there appears to be a parallel emergence of universal trends, such as the increased movement of commodities, money, information, and people across international borders, as well as the advancement of technology, institutions, legal systems, and infrastructures required to facilitate this movement (United Nations 2019). This global phenomenon has had a tremendous impact on religious towns all over the world, resulting in considerable physical changes and the commercialisation of religious practices, all in an effort to satiate the evolving and growing desire for modern spiritual connection.

To accommodate the massive influx of pilgrims, it is essential to provide a suitable infrastructure that meets their demands and provides a variety of lodging alternatives, food choices, and transportation services (Sánchez, Fernández & Lara, 2016). Without question, the exponential growth of pilgrimage has generated significant financial gains for international tourist companies, who are directly benefiting from an increase in revenue. While religious sites have retained some of their distinguishing characteristics, the tourism sector has expanded to include more leisure-related aspects at sacred sites. This phenomena has been studied in depth, with scholars observing a significant shift from the prospect of going to the gods' abode to a place of vacation that is more focused on pleasure and recreation (Kaelber, 2006), thus contributing to globalisation and commodification of religious spaces (Alipour, Olya & Forouzan, 2017). A multidisciplinary effort, including

perspectives from anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and tourist studies, examines the relationship between religious tourism and globalisation. Researchers in these areas look at how globalisation affects religious tourism, how it affects sacred sites and local communities, and the various ways that people from different cultural and social backgrounds engage in religious tourism.

Challenges Faced by Religious Tourism Due to Globalisation

From the point of view of tourism, globalisation serves to remove barriers and obstacles to travel among countries and facilitates the establishment of a global market, resulting in tourism boom (Ghobadi & Verdian, 2016). On the other hand there are several consequences also. Local businesses and traditional handicrafts can be supplanted by global chains, and as a result, a large number of individuals can relocate to search out a livelihood (Mayer, 2013). A further issue is that numerous sacred places are at risk of poor environmental preservation and the deterioration of local communities' cultural identities brought on by resource extraction. Lakes, rivers, mountains, and other revered sites have been harmed by commercial interests during the past century, resulting in their degradation and the loss of their original splendour and visual appeal (Derman, 2003).

The growing number of pilgrims aids the development of modern branded tourism commodities in pilgrimage destinations and exacerbates the drastic changes occurring in the old tradition of pilgrimage (Griffin & Raj, 2017). This trend can especially be noticeable in Asia, where major spiritual and religious icons like temple complexes at Cambodia, Japanese Holy mountains, South Korean Buddhist temples, and Hindu sacred sites in India, are all experiencing widespread development and increased numbers of pilgrims and tourists annually, resulting in rapid transformations and extensive globalisation (Griffin, Raj & Yasuda, 2018). The absence of regulation and lack of infrastructural support leads to a condition where a high influx of religious tourists threatens the cultural and environmental sustainability of religious tourism destinations (Shinde, 2012). Aside from this, pilgrims are tourists in the traditional sense; they book travel packages that include visits to holy cities and sacred places associated with their religion,

luxury accommodation, shopping and dining at branded establishments, and so on (Qurashi, 2017). This has all drastically weakened the spiritual ethos of the religious sites.

Overall, therefore, religious tourism due to globalisation is a double-edged sword; it brings economic benefits but also brings challenges that need to be addressed in order to preserve the religious and cultural heritage of these places and maintain the spiritual significance for the local communities.

Globalisation and India's Religious Hindu Landscape

When thinking about religious tourism in India, it is clear that there are several religions and religious practices, all of which are geographically and culturally unique and result in a variety of social distinctions. Anywhere one goes to India, one will visit a living landscape where mountains, rivers, woods and villages are interconnected with mythical stories (Eck, 1998). They form a network of referential, inter-referential, ancient, modern and ever changing complexes. This liberal distribution of pilgrimage sites has created a continuous religious topography (Eck, 1998). Around 250 million Hindu devotees travel throughout India and from outside each year to participate in festivals, pilgrimage circuits, ceremonial cleansings, and other such activities. Likewise, many thousands of people of other religions also visit India each year to admire its ancient and beautiful Hindu architecture and important historical sites that are associated with the religion (Singh, 2017). A study by the Delhi based *National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER)* shows that of the 230 million tourist trips undertaken in India, the largest proportion is made up of religious pilgrimages (NCAER, 2015). The numbers of annual visitors recorded in a few pilgrimage sites are indicative of the magnitude of religious travel; 18.2 million in *Puri*, 17 million in *Vaishno Devi*, 11 million in *Haridwa*r and so on (NCAER, 2015).

As a result of the aforementioned growth, all Indian Hindu pilgrimage sites are expanding, developing, and receiving more visitors and pilgrims. Thus, effective management of religious tourism is required due to the physical mobility of visitors and their desire for a better experience at these locations. A highly diverse tourism

environment has resulted from the ongoing modernisation and commercialisation of religious assets, which has enhanced the already-present cultural, aesthetic, and historical qualities of these hallowed locations. As a result, the original ideas that first attracted pilgrims to these sites are fading with time.

For example, the *Char Dham Yatra* in India, is no longer regarded as a serene destination where pilgrims used to absorb the peaceful ambiance, respect the holiness of nature, and ponder tranquilly. It has been converted by the government into a highly commercial tourist destination that is unsustainable, loud, and insensitive to the environment. It is no longer a pilgrimage site, and the primary goal is to increase the tourism revenue. The same can be said about other sacred cities like *Shirdi, Vaishno Devi, Tirupati, Puri,* etc., where, as a result of the great economic influence of religious tourism, these cities have experienced a process of modernisation and globalisation in terms of commercial operations as well as massive infrastructural enhancements (Shinde, 2017). Unnecessary commodification has hampered the authenticity of these pilgrimage destinations and the religious rituals associated with them.

Methodology

Having introduced the impact of religious commodification and globalisation, the methodology is now focused upon the study of Vrindavan, where by using the purposive survey method and qualitative exploratory research strategy, the paper aims to identify the factors influencing the transformation of a pilgrimage site into a tourist destination. By doing this, the paper identifies different parameters affecting cultural and spiritual values, and recommend suggestions that would help to bridge the gap between urbanisation and spirituality.

The methods involved are in-depth interviews and focus groups, which include international and domestic visitors, government officials, hotel owners, shopkeepers, and local residents. In-depth interviews and focus groups are both qualitative research methods. In-depth interviews involve one-on-one conversations between a researcher and a participant, in which the researcher asks open-ended questions to gather detailed information about a specific topic (Kothari, 2004). Focus groups involve a

small group of participants who are brought together to discuss a specific topic or product, and a moderator leads the discussion. Both methods allow researchers to gain a deeper understanding of participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the topic of interest (Kothari, 2004).

The interviews showed a number of recurrent themes, such as the value of true spiritual encounters, the effects of religion commodification, and participants' assessments of the ensuing changes. Additionally, selecting focus groups and conducting in-depth interviews were made easier by a thorough review of the pertinent literature on the issue. This review performed a number of functions, including assessing the present state of knowledge, highlighting knowledge gaps, and estimating the potential contribution of the proposed study. The information gathered was used to create the study's methodology, formulate research questions, and direct the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered. The literature review also contributed to the development of the study's theoretical framework by highlighting important ideas and factors that must be taken into account during the research phase.

Figure 1: Location Map of Braj Region and Vrindavan
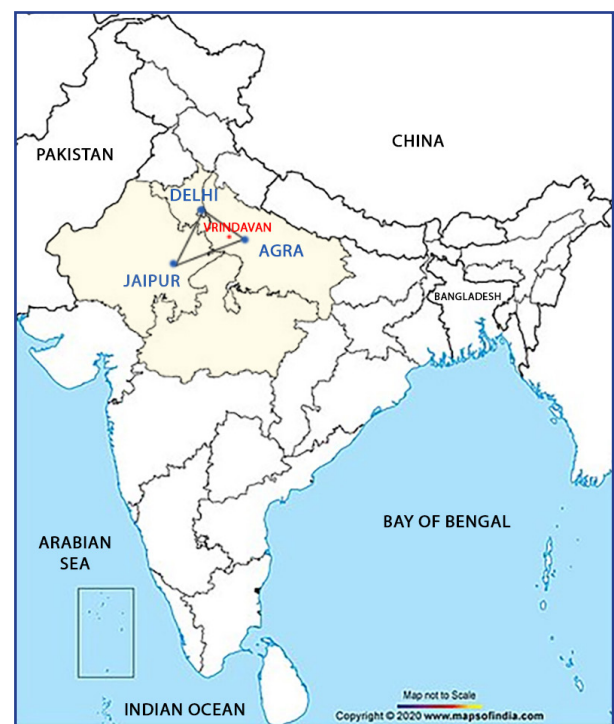
Source: by Author on the basis of data collected

Figure 2: Physical Mapping of Vrindavan City
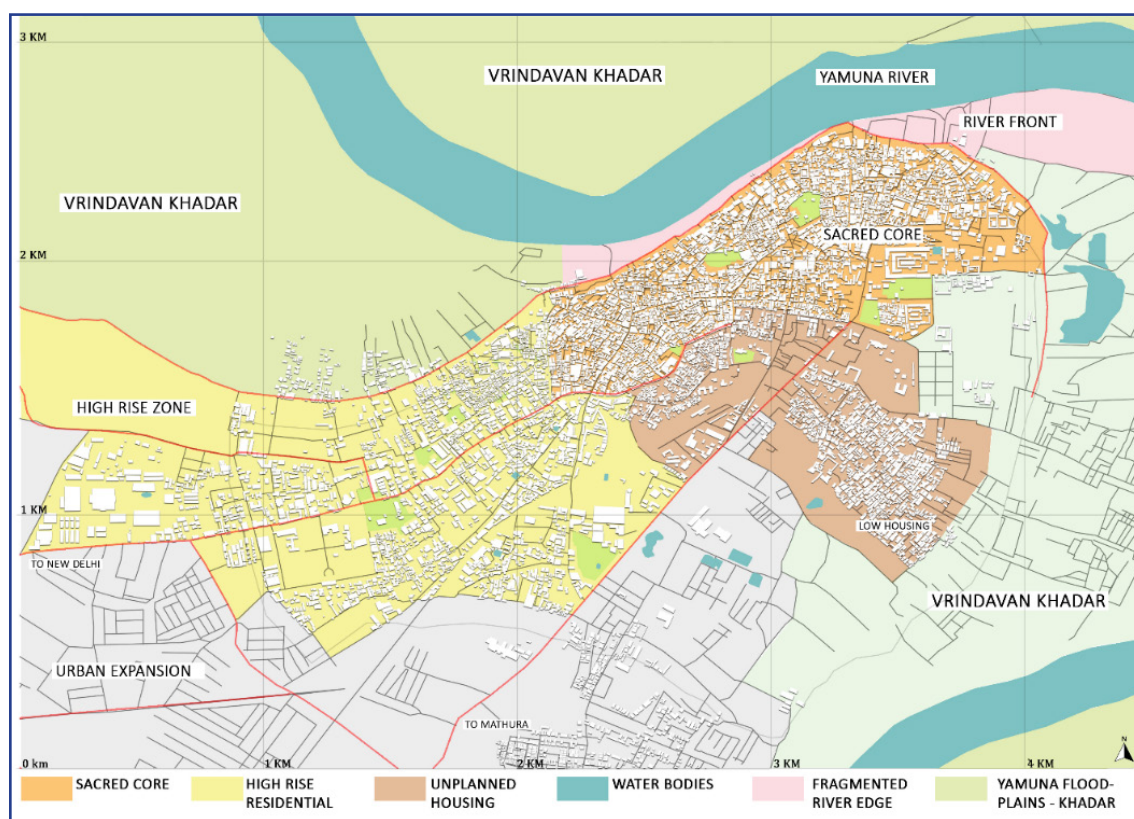
Source: Generated by Author on the basis of data collected during the survey of the city

City Context: Vrindavan

Vrindavan symbolises the effects of unnecessary commodification and its effects on the authenticity of sacred dimensions. It grew as a sacred city located on the banks of river *Yamuna*, in the *Braj* region of Northern India, 150 kilometres south of Delhi and about 50 kilometres north-west of Agra. As per the 2011 Census of India, the population of the town was 63,000 (Census UP, 2011). It is a *Nagar Palika Parishad* city in the district of *Mathura, Uttar Pradesh*. It is an important pilgrimage attraction and also a part of the famous *'Golden Triangle for Tourism'*, including Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra as shown in Figure 1. Being a prominent Hindu pilgrimage centre with over 5,000 temples devoted to *Krishna or Bihari ji,* as known locally, it hosts around 13 million tourists annually (Udyoh Bandhu, no date).

Spatial Mapping of the City

The city of Vrindavan was mapped out in detail to show the location of its many physical and socioeconomic features, such as its temples, neighbourhoods, businesses, and roads. The Morphological setting of the city consists of the sacred core, the high-rise zone, *Vrindavan Khadar*, many water-bodies and landscape elements and unplanned housing settlements as explained in Figure 2. The sacred core houses many temples and heritage structures, sacred grooves, waterbodies, palatial mansions etc. and many of these structures are listed in the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India, no date). Urban expansion in the town is towards the New Delhi Highway and Yamuna Expressway. The Yamuna River bounds the city on its northern side, which was once the main gateway, but as the city's connections shifted to inland transportation systems, the city's bustling riverside has become disconnected from the city, and the structures around the riverside Ghats are now dilapidated. The Yamuna River plains or Vrindavan *Khadar* in the north-western section of the city have witnessed the majority of new construction activities in the past decade. Overall, spatial mapping of the city of Vrindavan provided a comprehensive understanding of the city, its physical and social characteristics, and how it functions as a religious, cultural and tourist destination.

Evolution of Pilgrimage in Vrindavan

Vrindavan was depicted in several theological scriptures, such as the *Bhgavata Puran*, as the grove of the goddess *Brinda* (Tulsi plant) - a place where *Krishna*, a Vishnu avatar, vanquished the evil *Kaliya* snake, slayed the demon *Keshi*, and danced with his devotees. Furthermore, it is believed to have been the place where *Krishna* spent his childhood. However, the glory of Vrindavan as a destination for *Krishna*'s devotion faded between the 4th and 14th century due to repeated invasions and the rise of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. It was only in the 14th century, when the Bhakti movement was led by *Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*, a Hindu reformer from *Nabadwip* in eastern India, that it began to reclaim its importance as a centre of *Krishna*'s devotion (Hein & Entwistle, 1989). As a result of several repossession throughout the region, *Vanayatra* began as a pilgrimage tour through the *Braj* forests, where pilgrims *circumambulated* the sites where *Krishna* is said to have accomplished some divine act. (Ray, 2012). With the construction of some temples in Vrindavan in the late 16th and early 17th century, the region started attracting pilgrims from all around India. By the end of the nineteenth century, as the number of tourists continued to rise, numerous large scale temples along with multiple lodges, Ashrams, and hotels were built in the region (Ray, 2012). With the advent of the *Neo Vrindavan movement* in the late nineteenth century, the city garnered worldwide popularity. Devotees from all over the world began to flock to the vrindavan, marking a turning point for pilgrimage in the region.

Transformation of the Pilgrimage Experience in Vrindavan

The metamorphosis of the pilgrimage experience in Vrindavan can be attributed to various factors, such as the expansion of the tourism industry, urban development, and shifts in religious practices. The pilgrimage experience here has been significantly shaped by urban growth in particular. With the installation of new structures and infrastructure to support the growing population and tourism, the city has experienced expansion and progress. As a result, the physical landscape has changed, which has an effect on the cultural and religious value it carries for both local residents and pilgrims.

In the *Braj* region, each temple, hilltop, and tree has its own mythology, as well as stories concerning divine acts. In earlier times, the pilgrimage to Vrindavan used to consist of visiting important temples, bathing in the Yamuna, visiting *guru ashrams* and several *gaushalas*, and performing the *Parikrama*, in which visitors would come across spiritual pleasure sites where *Krishna* had eternally encountered his favourite *Gopi Radharani*. However, as the repercussions of urbanisation and globalisation have expanded, pilgrimage is now restricted to a small number of heritage sites, with a predilection for new high-rise commodified temples.

During the 1960s, the emergence of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), along with several foreign based organisations, prompted thousands of international pilgrims to visit Vrindavan, who accumulated a large number of real estate properties in the surrounding area. Furthermore, rich foreign and Indian pilgrims like lodgings with air conditioning and extra luxuries, thus, Vrindavan has recently undergone considerable socio-cultural and physical transformations in order to fulfil these objectives. The growth of this infrastructure has changed how pilgrims travel nowadays.

Figure 3: Evolution and Transformation of Vrindavan Parikrama

PARIKRAMA DURING 15TH CENTURY

PARIKRAMA DURING 18TH CENTURY

PARIKRAMA POST 19TH CENTURY
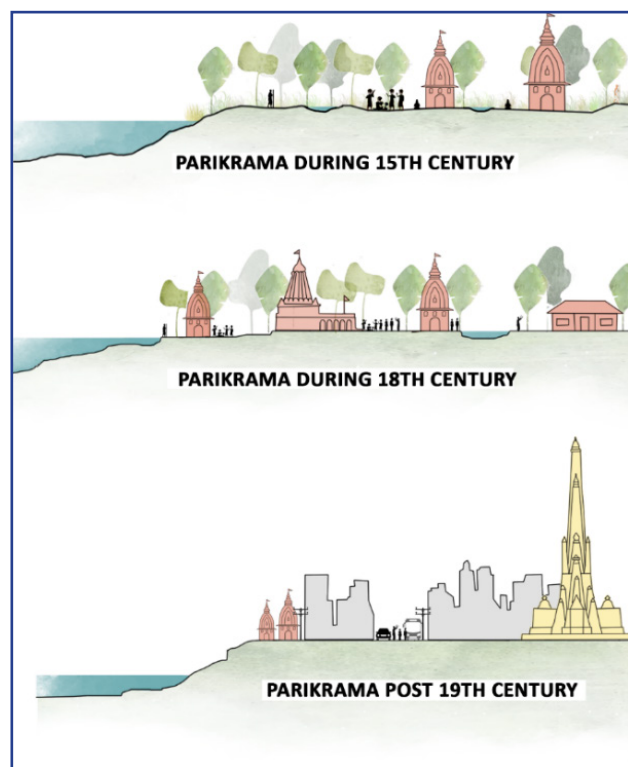
However, the massive stream of pilgrims has resulted in overpopulation and commercialisation, endangering the search for spirituality.

As a result, over time the characteristics that initially enthralled travellers in Vrindavan have been lost. Landscape deterioration in the Braj region is an unavoidable result. To meet the ever-increasing expectations of tourists, the hitherto untamed and tranquil environs are now mobilised, altered, and eaten. Due to the development of new infrastructure and technologies, these locations, which were formerly hidden away in hills and impenetrable forests, are now commercialised tourist destinations. The pilgrim path, which in the past was through a calm and quite natural landscape, has suffered a great loss in its sanctity, which is explained through the sections across *Parikrama Marg* in Figure 4. Today, if the pilgrim desires to meditate, pray, or chant their mantras as they carry out the pilgrimage, their concentration is broken by hassling hawkers, screeching vendors, and honking vehicles (Shinde, 2012). This is detrimental to the pilgrim experience and the entire essence of the pilgrimage.

Figure 4: The Current State of Vrindavan Parikrama Marg with Traffic and Encroachments on Either Side

Source: Author

Figure 5: When Seeking to Reach Many Sacred Locations Within the Venerable Old City, the Crumbling Lanes Pose a Tremendous Challenge
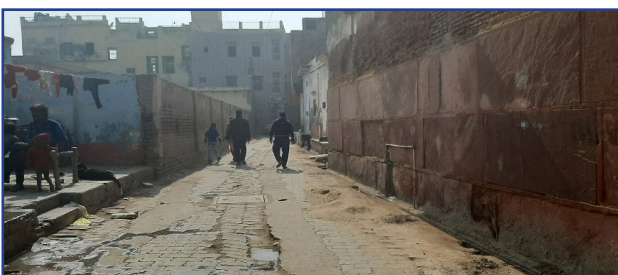
Source: Author

How Spatial Transformation has Impacted Vrindavan's Religious Landscape

The transformations in Vrindavan are part of larger change and modernisation that is imparting a homogeneous character to the city and leading to socio spatial contestation. Due to erratic development, government corruption, and poor waste mismanagement, Vrindavan has become an ecologically damaged and unsanitary place to live. The growth of tourism and urban development have led to the construction of new buildings and infrastructure to accommodate the growing population and tourism. This has led to changes in the physical landscape of the city, including the development of new residential and commercial areas, as well as new transportation infrastructure. These changes have had an impact on the cultural and religious significance of the city for local communities and pilgrims.

The increase in tourism has led to the commodification of the pilgrimage experience, with a greater focus on leisure and recreation rather than solely on spiritual or religious experiences. Consequently, congestion, strain on infrastructure and resources, and the deterioration of the sites themselves have reduced the cultural and religious significance of Vrindavan for local populations. Alterations to the physical landscape of Vrindavan have also resulted from changes in religious practice. As a result of globalisation and the proliferation of new religious movements, there is now a wider variety of religious practices in the city. As a result, virtual pilgrimage and other types of modern religious tourism have evolved and are transforming religious life in Vrindavan.

Overall, the spatial transformation of Vrindavan has had a significant impact on the religious landscape of the city. While it has brought economic benefits through tourism, it has also led to changes in the cultural and religious significance of the city for local communities and has also led to issues such as overcrowding, strain on infrastructure and resources, and damage to the sites themselves. The pilgrimage to Vrindavan has evolved from its original meaning, as a journey to the gods' abode to being a place of vacation which is oriented more towards pleasure and recreation (Karamihova, 2018).

Proclamations of the Focus Group			
User group		**Key Statements**	**Identified Themes**
Tourist Based Focus Group			
Pilgrims	Domestic Pilgrims	*Parikrama Marg is now no longer in a good condition, which earlier used to have lush greeneries and many species of local animals like peacocks, deer etc. Its is filled with congestion making it difficult to meditate.*	Spiritual experience and authenticity; Perception about transformation
	International Pilgrims	*Vrindavan is an excellent tourist destination easily accessible from Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. However, we never have visited the ancient sacred places associated with Lord Krishna.*	Religious commodification; Spiritual Experience and Authenticity
Leisure Seeking Tourists	Domestic Tourists	*We usually visit Vrindavan during occasions like Holi and New year. It is very congested at that time and its very difficult to avail the accommodation, roads are always blocked with traffic.*	Religious commodification
	International Tourists	*New modern temples in Vrindavan have much better and advanced infrastructure, they also provide us with luxury rented apartments and guided tour packages of Braj.*	Religious commodification
Resident Focus Group			
Locals Involved in Pilgrimage Supporting Activities	Pandas (Temple Guides and Priests)	*There are 5000 temples of Radha-Krishna here, only one or two of them are visited by tourists. New western appeal temples attract most of the visitors.*	Religious commodification; Perception about transformation
	Shop Owners Selling Religious Ceremonial Goods	*Coming of several global chains in vrindavan has declined the economy of local market and shop owners.*	Spiritual experience and authenticity
	Yatra Organisers	*In Vrindavan, we provide our own customised tour packages. The majority of the tourist attractions in the packages are restricted to the new city. It is difficult to visit temples in the old city due to dilapidated infrastructure.*	Religious commodification; Spiritual experience and authenticity
People Engaged in Commercial Activities	Hotel / Lodge Owners	*To cater for the demand of modern tourist, we also have to go with the recent trends in the industry. Many hotels have been built up in last 10 years to accommodate visitors.*	Perception about transformation
	Real Estate Developers	*Good market potential*	Religious Commodification; Perception about transformation
	Shopkeepers	*Global chains have increased competition*	Religious Commodification
	Artisans and Craftsmen	*Mass production has effected lots of the traditional art and handicrafts of Vrindavan like folk paintings, poshak making etc. We are forced to leave this ancient practice of art and most of us have already changed our occupations.*	Religious Commodification; Perception about transformation
People Who do Not Engage in Tourism-related Activities	Local Residents	*Most of the land here is under the hands of real estate developers. We have also sold our property and now we are living in the city outskirts as our family income was drastically effected by changing pilgrimage patterns*	Perception about transformation

Identification of Focus Groups

In order to examine the impact of globalisation on religious tourism in Vrindavan, India, a number of diverse focus groups were identified. A total of 80 people from different potential groups were questioned. These included villagers supporting local and foreign pilgrims, pandas (religious guides), store owners, those working in the commercial sector such artisans and craft workers, real estate developers, and hotel and lodge proprietors.

Pilgrim focus groups included individuals who have travelled to Vrindavan for a religious or spiritual experience. They provided insights into how globalisation has affected their pilgrimage experience and how it has changed over time. Local residents included individuals who live in Vrindavan and have been affected by the changes in the city due to tourism and urban development. They provided insight into the impact of globalisation on their daily lives and how it has affected the cultural and religious significance of the city for them.

Tour operators and service providers included individuals and businesses that provide services to tourists, such as lodging, transportation, and tours. Religious leaders and scholars included individuals who are experts in the religious and cultural significance of Vrindavan and how it has been affected by globalisation. They provide insight into the impact of globalisation on the religious practices and beliefs in Vrindavan.

Focus Group Outcome and Discussion

Based on analysis of data from the focus groups, and follow up in-depth interviews with a selection of focus group participants, key observations were made based on three identified themes. These are described with the help of quotations from pilgrims which are presented in detail in Table 1. The three identified themes are:

- Spiritual experience and authenticity

- Religious commodification

- Perception about transformation

a) Spiritual Experience and Authenticity

It is believed that spending time in Vrindavan's sacred geography will cleanse the spirit of all misdeeds committed in past lives and allow it to experience transcendental happiness, which is its highest purpose (Luthy, 2014). In recent times, however, several transformations in the city have hindered this spiritual experience. New changes have been observed in the Vrindavan Parikrama, which is performed throughout the year by millions of people, especially during special occasions such as *Ekadashi* and *Guru Poornima*. The *Parikrama Marg* was once an interwoven network of streets and public areas that hosted daily rituals, religious ceremonies, and other events while also giving a glimpse of the city's cultural splendour and rich flora and fauna. Some of this has now become part of the state highway, making it extremely difficult for pilgrims to walk on as shown in Figure 4. According to one regular visitor, this Marg is no longer pedestrian-friendly and is frequently subjected to intense traffic movement throughout the day, making it extremely dangerous. Due to this, many tourists often avoid participating in the sacred parikrama.

The majority of the spaces in the area around *Parikrama Marg* is also subjected to illegal encroachments, parking, garbage disposal, and open sewerage. Because of this, tourists and pilgrims cannot meditate or experience the spiritual ethos that existed there previously. Our discussion with a local priest revealed that numerous temples and spiritual sites scattered along *Parikrama Marg*, including *Vamshi Vata Tree, Keshi Ghat, Raman Reti*, and others are inaccessible due to insufficient connectivity and visibility as shown in Figure 5. As a result, many sacred locations have lost their essence and are now in a deteriorated state. With the development of new contemporary temples, the authenticity of many heritage temples in the sacred core is being eroded, as they tend to attract more visitors compared to the old ones.

b) Religious Commodification

The New high rise commercialised temples along Chathikala Road, which connects the city to Delhi NCR via National Highway 2, attract most of the visitors. The new development, however, is detrimental to the town's

Figure 6: Chatikala Road is Subjected to Traffic Throughout the Day Due to High Tourist Numbers

Source: Author

heritage. Due to the neglected potential of the sacred core, most of the development work and funds are focused on the new city. Temples in Vrindavan now style themselves as theme parks, and the world's tallest religious building is under construction (Hawley, 2019). Gentrification and a related real estate boom have completely transformed the cultural specificity and uniqueness of the town (Ray, 2012).

Footfall in the sacred centre has significantly fallen in the last 10 years, according to some locals who are also guardians of the ancient temples. Many traditional communities in Vrindavan's old city have been forced to migrate to the outskirts of the city, in search of new employment opportunities, as their whole livelihood formerly relied on pilgrims and tourists visiting the temples in the old city. Due to the large influx of foreign capital into Vrindavan, the pilgrim economy of the city has dramatically changed. Along Chathikala

Figure 7: Most of the Land Along the Vrindavan Khaddar had Been Filled up to Pave out the Way for New Construction

Source: Author

Figure 8: Vrindavan Yamuna Where with all the Sewerage from the City Flows into the River;

Source: Author

Road (Figure 6), dozens of new high-rise temples have sprouted, and these sacred spaces have become heavily commodified, with visitors paying to see *Krishna*. In addition to providing religious services, these temples also serve as the backbone of the real estate industry, selling multi-story luxury apartments, weekend houses, private villas, and so on, while developing (faking) a false narrative by using names like Hare *Krishna* apartments and Vrindavan homes.

c) Perception about Transformation

The central region of Vrindavan has been experiencing widespread transformation and subsequent competition of various kinds as a result of increased urbanisation, social reforms, and extensive commercialisation. Ubiquitous commercialisation has culminated in a development of modern buildings with no urban planning guidelines, creating conflict and contestation in urban spaces. It has also resulted in conflict between the city's imaginary and concrete landscape.

On one side, rapid urbanisation is causing outmigration of traditional communities, while on the other side, the influx of people from all over the world is forming a heterogeneous society in the town, causing conflict for local culture and space. Due to the large number of global and domestic tourists visiting Vrindavan, gated housing, luxury apartments, and other non-traditional real estate developments are encroaching on the city,

posing a danger to its sacred ethos and rendering the city with a homogenous character. The temple-dominated skyline has now been completely annihilated by high rise apartment buildings.

Owing to the lack of space, pilgrims are competing for places to perform various rituals and activities associated with pilgrimage. Today, Vrindavan presents a very ominous picture, real estate complexes have largely replaced the groves where *Krishna* and his cows were said to wander. Ironically, the developers have chosen to promote the lush greenery of the city, which they have nearly destroyed, even Yamuna River, on whose banks *Krishna* is said to have played as a child, is filthier than the sewers that pour into it as shown in Figure 8.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a result of relentless speculative development, Vrindavan is gradually forfeiting a significant portion of its traditional and sacred essence. It is essential to establish and sincerely implement a modern regulatory framework for its ancient and sacred neighbourhoods, in order to preserve its sacredness. Although the city has benefited economically from globalisation, the current course being taken is likely to produce unavoidable effects that demand additional investigation. Consequently, a few suggestions have been thought out below, developed from the themes that have been observed.

The old temples over the time have lost their importance owing to the development of new commodified temples. Therefore, there is a need to revive the importance of these old sacred temples, which can be done by developing the spatial links that once existed, enhancing *Parikrama Marg*, and restoring the tourist footfall. Furthermore, the sacred landscape, which once supported a diverse range of flora and fauna peculiar to the region, must be restored and revitalised. The exploration of these strategies can help in restoring Vrindavan's lost Spiritual Experience and Authenticity.

While discussing the strategies to counteract Religious Commodification, one should first understand that Vrindavan as a scared city has been subjected to extensive commercialisation. There is a large inflow of foreign capital in Vrindavan, the majority of which is utilised for creating commodified sacred spaces. Global chains have gobbled up the local markets by replacing the existing tangible and intangible heritage assets and a divide has been created between old and new. Thus, there is a need for a balance between old and new development activities, as well as an appropriate management system in place to allocate funds evenly. The research also further proposes that Vrindavan, being a home to more than 5000 heritage temples, also has a potential to be included in the list of temple cities of India.

The huge increase in visitors to the city is the root cause of the extensive changes covered in this paper. The city has become more homogeneous as a result of this inflow, which has also caused local residents to leave. In order to prevent the displacement of indigenous communities, a comprehensive tourism management strategy is necessary to direct the upcoming development and ensure the execution of zoning regulations and land use limitations. The traditional and religious character of Vrindavan is being eroded by the city's insatiable needs for speculative development. It is crucial to create a modern regulatory framework for the city's ancient and sacred neighbourhoods in order to protect the city's sanctity. This framework ought to be created with the intention of promoting sustainable growth while also defending and preserving the city's cultural and religious history.

Recommendations for Preserving Vrindavan's Sanctity

The following strategic recommendations, built on the findings of the primary research are made to protect Vrindavan's sacredness and address the problems it confronts:

- Implementing stricter regulations on development in historic and sacred neighbourhoods: This could include establishing building codes and zoning laws that protect the architectural and cultural heritage of the city.

- Developing a conservation plan for sacred sites: This could include identifying and protecting the most important sacred sites in the city, as well as establishing guidelines for their preservation and restoration.

- Encouraging sustainable tourism: This could include promoting responsible tourism practices and developing policies that support local businesses and communities.

- Developing an integrated waste management system: This could include policies and infrastructure that support the efficient collection, treatment, and disposal of waste.

- Promoting education of the local population and tourists about the cultural and religious significance of Vrindavan: This could include developing educational programs.

- Developing a system of sustainable development that ensures that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own.

Implementing Systemic Changes for Vrindavan's Future

Converting the above strategic recommendations into concrete systemic changes can bring about necessary regional, fiscal, and social changes in Vrindavan. This can be done by:

- Developing and implementing a comprehensive regulatory framework that addresses the issues of zoning, building codes, heritage conservation, and sustainable tourism.

Establishing a system of monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the regulations are being implemented effectively, and to track the progress of the city's development over time.

Creating a system of stakeholder engagement, to ensure that the perspectives and needs of local residents, religious leaders, and other stakeholders are taken into account when making decisions about the city's development.

Establishing a system of fiscal incentives and disincentives to encourage sustainable development and discourage unsustainable practices.

Developing a system of capacity building and training to ensure that local officials, developers, and other stakeholders have the skills and knowledge they need to implement the regulatory framework effectively.

Conducting ongoing research and analysis to better understand the impact of globalisation on Vrindavan and other cities facing similar challenges, and to identify best practices for addressing these challenges.

Comparison of the study with other cities facing similar challenges would pave a middle ground between globalisation and the aspirations of a sacred city.

Comprehensive and coordinated systemic changes must be made in order to effectively address the issues facing Vrindavan, protect its unique cultural and religious history, and advance sustainable development. In order to handle the city's problems holistically, it is necessary to balance the benefits of tourism from an economic standpoint with the need to protect the city's cultural and religious history while promoting sustainable growth. These systemic reforms must to be founded on a thorough comprehension of the special qualities and needs of the city, and they ought to actively involve locals, religious leaders, and other stakeholders. By doing this, it will be possible to guarantee that the city's development meets the demands of both the present and the future generations in a way that is both inclusive and sustainable.

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