

# Heritage and Environment: Visions of past and future in the Indian temple town Vrindavan

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## Introduction

In contemporary India, temple towns and religious-spiritual centres such as Varanasi, Puri, or Vrindavan are gradually becoming important destinations for national and international tourism. In a time of rapid changing of milieus, we still grapple to understand the social and cultural dynamics and realities that underlie process of urbanization and socio-environmental changes in Indian cities. In this article, we investigate such processes in the Indian temple town of Vrindavan, asking first how new forms of tourism and urban development lead to contemporary environmental challenges, and secondly how different agents respond to these changes locally? To this end, we focus on the narratives of past and future by people from local environmental and heritage conservation NGOs, religious elites, middle scale entrepreneurs and ordinary citizens.

The article refers to some concrete examples of development and socio-environmental changes within the town, such as the construction of a transportation bridge over the Yamuna river at Keshi ghat and the increasing amount of tourists and pilgrims' visits, requiring better infrastructure and housing facilities. First, we describe the present-day environmental and socio-economic situation of the town with the changes in tourism patterns. The construction of the bridge has been the latest in a series of events that evoked debates around urban development and tourism influx in Vrindavan. It was opposed by local initiatives, such as environmental NGOs, who see these developments as an intervention into and irreversible socio-environmental damage of the 'sacred landscape', whereas most of the residents, who have been interviewed, seemed to be in its favour. We begin the article with analysing the recent development of increasing tourism and development in Vrindavan from a sociological perspective.

Finally, we address the fragmentary processes of modernisation and development of Vrindavan and the environmental challenges that come with them. Urban development and tourism in the Indian temple town are shaped by socio-economic and socio-cultural processes that arise both from ‘within and outside’ of Vrindavan. These processes and events evoke different responses by local agents, thus highlighting the various existing parallel narratives and imaginations of the city, which, as they do not speak to one another, thus fail to reconcile the contradictory stands on uncontrolled urban development and issues regarding sustainable environment. The processes that influence Vrindavan’s socio-environment, e.g. religious tourism, industrialization, infrastructural and housing development, are infrequently conducted in consultation with the local community, and the local populations seem not to be prepared to deal with the environmental consequences that are implied with these processes.

#### Religious tourism in Vrindavan

Vrindavan is a Hindu pilgrimage town in the federal state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in today’s Mathura district situated on the banks of the Yamuna River and 160 kilometres south of New Delhi. The city and its adjacent region, known as the Braj area, are considered to be a significant pilgrimage and religious site for millions of people inside as well as outside of India. The significance of Vrindavan as a place of cultural and spiritual pilgrimage has rendered it a dham, a place of divine revelation within Indian religion, thought and folklore. India is Vrindavan has a special mythic significance for Hindus all over India. It is considered to be the terrestrial habitat of the Hindu god Krishna and the representation of his celestial abode, Goloka Vrindavan. Many of the important places in the region are associated with one or other story connected with the Krishna legend (Entwistle 1987). Vrindavan and the area of Braj are considered, in their oral and scriptural-mythological representation, as a replica of the earth, the ‘footprint of ecology of the earth’ (Haberman 1994; Sullivan 1998).

Religious tourism is a term widely used in theory and practice to refer to contemporary travel patterns to pilgrimage sites. It is ‘closely or loosely connected with holiday-making’ (Tomasi, 2002, p. 19). The destination for religious tourism is generally a sacred site, a pilgrimage site or a religious heritage site. It combines two opposite ends of the binary — sacred and profane — as reflected in the pilgrimage–tourism dichotomy (Nolan and Nolan 1992; Smith

1992 in Shinde 2009). Often, the key aspects of pilgrimage — the motivation for the trip, form of the journey and a sacred destination — are used to explain religious tourism where leisure and holiday activities occur as supplementary opportunities within the need for religious travel (Tyrakowski 1994 in Schinde 2009).

In the last two decades India has witnessed an increasing number of middle and upper class citizens travelling to pilgrim sites and demanding spiritual encounter with urban amenities. The new patterns of travel by upscale clientele, including young professionals, rich non-resident Indians as well as foreigners reflect the increasing use of hotels and resorts and services offered by tourism enterprises. Integrated townships, enclosed luxury apartment complexes, modern infrastructures (i.e. express highways, flyovers and bridges) have mushroomed within a short amount of time. Presently Vrindavan has a population of approximately 65,000 but at present annual visitation exceeds more than six million visitors (Shinde 2012). The population of Vrindavan has experienced a high rate of growth in the last decades, attributed to increase in the pilgrimage activity and resultant in-migration from surrounding region due to economic potential of providing employment opportunities in the tertiary sector, as almost 90% of the town's economy is dependent on pilgrimage and related services (Shinde 2009: 38). The daily "floating population" is reported to be around 20,000 and it rises to 150,000 during important festival days and these occur almost every month (Shinde 2009).

Vrindavan mirrors these wider trends. From a modest 5000 annual visitors in 1950, the number increased to more than 6 million in 2005 (Shinde 2012). Vrindavan as a pilgrimage site, thus, has become a convenient and easily accessible destination for visitors from the nearby cities such as Delhi, Jaipur and Agra, and serves as a weekend getaway for middle and upper class citizens coupled with religious and leisure activities. With the construction of new express highways, bypass and flyovers in the region, such as the Yamuna Expressway, roads are built with the idea to reduce the travel time between New Delhi and Agra and other destinations such as Mathura and Vrindavan significantly.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the number of visitors in Vrindavan has significantly increased since the 1990s. Traditionally, pilgrim towns have been small centres

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1. The Government of Uttar Pradesh has been working proactively to improve the connectivity of the National Capital Region (NCR) to improve tourist attraction of Taj Mahal at Agra through the new 6 Lanes highway. of U.P. The expressway has been operational for public traffic in August 2012 making it the preferred route from Delhi/ NCR to Agra.

of religious activities occasionally hosting big festivals. However, over a period of time some towns gained prominence and are being transformed into urban centers due to increased and regular visits by pilgrims and religious tourists. Vrindavan has for example grown from 4.1 square kilometres to 15.8 in the within a few years (Shinde 2009).

Pilgrimage as a spiritual journey is essentially an economic activity for the resident population in the town. Most of the residents earn their livelihood directly or indirectly from the 'pilgrimage industry'. The high volume of tourists and pilgrims visiting the town creates a perception of economic opportunity, but a privileged few have already laid claim to the market for visitors' goods and services, leaving no room for newcomers to secure living incomes (Banerjee 2004). Most of our interlocutors are employed or work within branches that provide services to the pilgrim and tourism industry, such as shop owners at the local bazaars, people working in the transportation service, people who provide direct services to temple and ashram residents and visitors (flower sellers, money exchangers, carpenters, electricians, craftsmen, gardeners, sweepers, cooks and musicians). Vrindavan is marketed in a similar way as a holiday destination, attracting tourist and capital; the new forms of entrepreneurship are manifestations of new patronage relationships (between residents and middle-class urban visitors) that establish the contemporary framework for religious tourism.

In Vrindavan, certain groups in society, such as small scale business men, entrepreneurs, merchandisers, and people working in the tertiary sector, all seem to profit from the recent developments of growing tourism and urban development. Most of the entrepreneurs and merchandisers in town earn their livelihood from providing services to the religious pilgrims/tourist industry and to local temples and ashrams.<sup>2</sup> Another group, who has strongly profited from the increasing number of tourists/pilgrims and urbanization, are religious institutions, such as temple trusts, maths and the priestly class, known as Goswamis. Most of the temple trusts own, next to temples, also guesthouses and large portions of land<sup>3</sup>. At the same time they are regarded as religious

2 We have interviewed shop owners, who are running their shops in the two main bazaars of Vrindavan (Loi Bazaar and Gopinath Bazaar) as well as entrepreneurs who provide services to the temples, ashrams and guest houses (i.e. Taxi owners, florists, money lenders, tourist guides, carpenters, craftsmen, etc.). Most of them belong to the old traditional India middle class, yet at the same time they are increasingly connected to a modernized capitalistic logic, acting on local and global markets. Another group, we have interviewed, are members of temple trusts and of the priestly class (so called Goswamis) in Vrindavan.

3 Approx. 70% of the land in Vrindavan belongs to temple trusts (Shinde 2011).

authorities and as influential players in the political affairs of the city (Shinde 2009; Sharma 2012).

### Environment and Heritage

Temple towns in India face environmental degradation due to the pressures exerted by an increased number of visitors, coupled with uncontrolled urban growth and driven by demand of supporting residential amenities and infrastructure. The changing of milieus (urbanization and development) combined with activities of religious tourism have led to considerable degradation of environment in pilgrim towns (Nagabhusanam 1997 in Shinde 2009). The character of traditional Vrindavan pilgrimage, which is intimately connected to the land and myth of Braj and Krishna, has, like other pilgrimage locations in India, become altered by the increased character of tourism and uncontrolled urban development. Such a shift has also been seen in pilgrimages in other locations and through the process of religious commodification (Gladstone 2005; Kitiarsa 2008). As a result, the many forest, groves and meadows, for which Vrindavan is famous for in popular images, have turned into housing and infrastructure developments. Pilgrimage to and contemplation in these groves are what attracted pilgrims to Vrindavan in the past. At the same time, the ancient temples in the older regions of the town have become increasingly dilapidated, the streets clogged with human and vehicle traffic, the general ambience of the town has become extremely disturbed and the environmental conditions within the town are poor.

The high influx of visitors in the last 20-30 years has put enormous strains on the environment of the town. Questions about the environment, sustainability and environmental change are especially critical in India where more than 100 million people travel to about 2000 pilgrimage sites annually (Gladstone 2005). In many pilgrimage sites, commonly reported environmental problems include unhygienic conditions resulting from overcrowding and strain on physical infrastructure, deforestation, land use changes and increased pollution of natural resources. Contemporary Vrindavan is confronted with a number of social and environmental problems, including unemployment<sup>4</sup> and poor overall public infrastructure; poor sanitation and civic facilities, spiralling population densities, deforestation and overdevelopment of real estate; loss of biodiversity and natural habitat; increased energy consumption, increased

4 Fewer than one third of the residents of Vrindavan, India have regular work. Of those who do, many make less than a dollar a day (Humphreys and Varshney, 2004). Rural families attempting to escape the abject poverty that confronts them in the countryside migrate to Vrindavan as well.

production of waste and pollution; water security and solid waste management issues; health issues from water-borne illnesses, and an acute lack of drinking water<sup>5</sup> (Banerjee 2004). In addition, the Yamuna river is highly polluted due to industrial runoff from factories upriver and due to all the sewage and wastewater of Vrindavan that drains into her. The problem is so serious that the Government of India has declared the Yamuna's water unfit for drinking and bathing (Haberman 2006). Vanishing forests, dusty roads, open and choked sewers, overflowing drains, dumps of garbage and noisy traffic, are a regular sight in the city.

#### 'New' and 'old' Vrindavan

Over the last 30 years Vrindavan has undergone substantial physical expansion mainly due to changing equations of demand and supply of land, physical resources, necessary for development of infrastructure for both pilgrimage and religious tourism economy. The outskirts of Vrindavan have been sub-divided into several housing colonies. The town has become visibly divided into two main parts: the old centre with its medieval temple and bazaars, the other part with modern residential flats, hotels and newly constructed temple sites, also referred to by locals as 'New Vrindavan'. New Vrindavan distinguishes itself in architecture, spatiality and temporality from the old town. Both parts are linked through roads and through flows of pilgrims who wish to see both sides: the new marble temples and statue parks pompously exposed on the main road, and the old decayed temples, ghats and bazaars hidden in the narrow streets.

Vrindavan has also witnessed an increasing state led urbanization and expansion. The U.P. government and the regional development agency, Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority (MVDA)<sup>6</sup> have been undertaking a multitude of construction and development projects in recent times and allotting infrastructure and residential projects to private companies.<sup>7</sup> The

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5 The lack of adequate drinking water is acute in Vrindavan and the area's ground aquifers are polluted daily because sanitary conditions and inadequate solid waste disposal leach untreated pathogens into the substrata, contaminating the underground water that is meant to serve the town. The outlets of individual toilets and septic tanks are illegally linked to overflowing sewer lines or directly joined to open drains.

6 Mathura - Vrindavan Development Authority was constituted in 1977 by the Uttar Pradesh Government. The authority is responsible for the urban development of the two cities and its adjacent regions as well as developing their infrastructures.

7 Omaxe, for instance, one of India's leading real estate developers, has received approval for layout plan from Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority, Uttar Pradesh for the construction of an integrated township "Omaxe Eternity at Vrindavan". Spread over an

U.P. government has further assigned the regional development authority to implement a Tourism Master Plan developing and boosting tourism in the region of Vrindavan. The Master Plan includes identification and selection of heritage sites important from the tourism angle identification of different sectors in district Mathura depending upon proximity, viability and accessibility, identification of infrastructural facilities needed to encourage tourism, river front development on Yamuna on desired locations, operation of transportation system dedicated to the augmentation of tourism, identification of locations for tourist resorts, prioritization of monuments/site for renovation, identification of required accessibility links of the sites, recommendable route-charts for tourists etc. (MVDA 2012).

Many spiritual leaders (gurus, acharyas) with their foreign and urban national followers have also over the last decades began to reside in Vrindavan. Building of new ashrams and temples became necessary in order to accommodate the newcomers. And with the financial help of their wealthy Indian and foreign devotees some gurus have constructed large and ostentatious temple sites in Vrindavan, mainly on the outskirts of town at Chattikara Road. In February 2012, for instance, Vrindavan witnessed the inauguration of the largest and most expensive temple complex in recent times. From all over India and abroad thousands of people came to the city to be part of the historical opening of the Prem Mandir (Temple of love) of the Jagadguru Kripalu Parishat, a worldwide Hindu-Vaishnava movement. The costs are estimated to be around 1 Billion USD (Vrindavan Today 2012). The entire building is made out of white Italian marble. The temple symbolises the new era of religious tourism and urbanization that has 'enchanted' the city. The construction of the temple has been accompanied by the building of new luxury apartment complexes and townships in the nearby area, promoting the it as a 'new Vrindavan', a modern temple city, which will grant you religious experience combined with unique flavours of luxury and comfort. According to the Information centre of Prem Mandir, the temple management had already received 2200 confirmed booking requests by followers of the movement, who wish to purchase or rent residential flats in the vicinity of the temple.<sup>8</sup>

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area of approx. 74.2 acres, Omaxe Eternity will be developed with an investment of approximately Rs. 250 crores.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Information desk staff, Vrindavan, 25.2.2012.

### Narratives of past and future

In narratives about contemporary Vrindavan and its local milieus, notions of a past heritage are often evoked, both in order to express an environment of rapid change, but also to incite activities to improve the situation. In many of the local organisations, the tension between the ‘sacred’ Vrindavan and the ‘physical’ Vrindavan drives the discourses and subsequent actions for protecting the town. The notion that Vrindavan’s contemporary ecological and cultural aesthetics of the city ought to be different to what it is today, thus guides much of the activism; on the one hand it “used to be better” in previous times, and on the other the mythological representation of Vrindavan is filled with notions of a magnificent and pure environment, vastly different from what is experienced in present-day Vrindavan:

We went for parikrama [walking on sacred path that circumambulates Vrindavan], I remember it was very beautiful. A lot cleaner than it is now, it was rural, definitely you could not get the food and filtered water as nowadays [... it has developed so much, materially speaking [...] spiritually it stays the same, it becomes materially more covered, more concrete roads, those were not here before, only village tracks; if you today drive out to the rural areas of Braj it was like that; this was Vrindavan in the early 1990s<sup>9</sup>.

While the myths and legends associated with Krishna and Vrindavan remain attracting crowds of pilgrims and devotees, the forests and groves have vanished; ‘sacred rivers and ponds’ have depleted and are contaminated. Many residents notice the increasing deterioration and urban development. In their personal narratives and stories they often relate, when confronted with questions of *pariveshavad* (environment) and *vikas* (development), to earlier times when the town was peaceful and quiet, surrounded by idyllic groves and forests, no heavy traffic, a clean Yamuna river.

When I was small I recall Vrindavan being a small place in the jungle. Places like Kailash Nagar and Gaur Nagar had been jungle [...] today these places have become residential flats [...] my father told me that 30 years ago nothing was here, it was totally a jungle<sup>10</sup>.

9 Interview with Gopal, Vrindavan, 14.2. 2012

10 Interview with Guddu, Vrindavan, 8.10 2011

Today the image of Vrindavan an outside visitor gets is of a congested, polluted, noisy, densely populated town, with neglected and run down temple sites, and with little green cover. Through housing development and infrastructure the nearby circumambulation path surrounding the town, the parikrama marg, has been sealed, leading to increased vehicle traffic and the deforestation of previously remote areas. Every day hundreds of residents and pilgrims walk on the parikrama marg as constitutive part of their daily ritual, as it is denoted by locals as one of the main sanctuaries of the town, and thus as in the case with the visiting pilgrims, it has become an inherent part of their pilgrimage duties. Along the path, pilgrims will find numerous lila stahlis, [sacred spaces], that are linked to the stories and mythic event of Krishna. Recently, parts of the parikrama marg have been renamed by the local authorities to the ‘VIP road’, a signifier for a modernizing city. It is a combination of flyovers and concrete roads that enable, foremost upper class tourist, a more rapid and more smooth passage from the main roads and other parts of town to the new residential and touristic hub. Local residents, like Shyamsundar, a 33 year old farmer, who lives on the parikrama path, are unhappy about the present situation:

Thousands of pilgrims walk on the parikrama marg on festival days, full moon and ekadashi [fasting day] and all these cars from outside think it is just another normal road, and the people walking on the road are perceived as a nuisance and are honked off the marg [...] the sacred vocation of Vrindavan is being destroyed by this kind of development<sup>11</sup>.

The process of modernization, improvement in transport, accommodation and communication has turned some places of pilgrimage to towns of modern tourism. On weekends and during festival days, the town is crowded with tourist, mainly from the nearby cities, like Delhi and Agra. The main roads to and from Vrindavan are clogged with traffic and people, the narrow lanes of the old part of town are filled with pilgrims on foot, on rickshaws or in cars on their way to temples for darshan. Girahi Lal and Bankey Lal two brothers, running a steel and brass shop in the main bazaar of town, also view the development of tourism with critical eyes:

Before [pilgrims] used to come once or twice a year, now they come throughout the year, and they are building all these

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Shyamasundara, Vrindavan, 27.2.2012.

modern flats which only people from outside are buying [...] now Vrindavan has become a picnic type place for visitors<sup>12</sup>.

Several physical environmental studies have reported on the environmental degradation of Vrindavan. According to reports of non-governmental and environmental organizations, spiraling population densities combined with visitor flows during pilgrimage events and poor sanitation and civic facilities, alongside real estate speculation, remain the root cause of several environmental problems in the city (Singh and Vir 1994; Shinde 2009; Sharma 2012). A further concern, one finds in those reports, is that the town has become badly deforested and the area is rapidly turning into a desert such as is to be found in Rajasthan. Friends of Vrindavan (FoV), one of the city's earliest environmental NGOs, founded in 1997, stresses the rapid and dramatic deterioration of the town in the last 15 years. "Vrindavan is moving towards an ecological disaster [...] day by day you see how its getting worse"<sup>13</sup>.

Some NGO's and civil societies groups have taken initiatives for environmental sustainability, yet the majority of local residents, as most of our communication and interviews are indicating, have limited concerns for the environment. Many local initiatives, except The Braj Foundation, lack the resources or political support to realise their (sacred) visions, and do not receive massive support from the citizens or religious institutions. The concern and activism for environment and heritage conservation, rest within the informed knowledge and international funded environmental NGOs.

For environmental and cultural activists of Vrindavan, modernisation harms the ecology and devalues the spiritual meaning of the experience and the importance of the rituals for visitors, and negatively affects the sanctity of the place. They point out that the increasing urbanisation of the town and swelling numbers of picnic yatris has reduced Vrindavan to the status of a religious marketplace. Yet it is 'modernity's child' itself - environmentalism-that can reverse the impacts of pollution and urbanisation. Environmental awareness, on the one side, does not appear to be a major priority of local residents as well as visiting pilgrims; on the other side a few NGO and local activists take the 'battle' against modernisation with strategies that are infused with modern techniques of eco-activism and mythic images of the sacred, eternal. In the social imaginaries of environmental activists in Vrindavan, nature

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12 Interview with Girahi Lal and Bankey Lal, Vrindavan, 10.11.2011

13 Interview with Jaganath Poddar, managing director of FoV, Vrindavan 12.10.2011.

is perceived as sacred and thus the concern for the environment is build upon an ontological balancing of mythic and (modern) scientific elements which are then composed into a self made social reality.

Given the changing environment in the temple town, numerous activities and plans are made to address environmental challenges and protect and renovate its cultural heritage. One example is the comprehensive plan that is being drawn to revive the cultural festivals of Braj to integrate it further into the national religious tourism circuit. The Braj Foundation, a non-profit organization, established in 2005 by eminent industrialists of India and abroad, has received the contract by the Mathura-Development authority to implement the Tourism Master Plan for the region. The organization aims to restore the environmental and cultural heritage of Braj by defying the intertwined relationship between environment, ritual and culture (The Braj Foundation 2011). In a short span of 5 years the Foundation has spent over Rupees 10 crores on restoration and research. It acknowledges that the region of Braj has a distinct and unique ecological, architectural and cultural heritage. Its employees in Vrindavan are very optimistic about their work to restore Braj's and Vrindavan's cultural pride: "We want that the government gives us authority to enact a plan for the city [...] to make one part of Vrindavan a heritage place, to take down the buildings and construct building in one same structure; an old Vrindavan as it used to be"<sup>14</sup>. The Foundation, according to the office staff wants to create an image of Vrindavan as found in the popular mythical and scriptural imaginations:

We want that people come and see the real beauty of Vrindavan, as they imagined in their dreams, but when they come today they see how deteriorated most places are [... our aim is to restore Braj as it was at the time of Krishna; when people come from far away, they should recognize that it is truly the Vrindavan of the scriptures... it is the same Yamuna as described in the popular songs and texts, the same forests and kunds.<sup>15</sup>

Hindu mythology is profusely linked to India's geography - its mountains, rivers, forests, shores, villages, and towns. It is arguable then that the 'imagined space' created in Hindu mythology is far more culturally powerful than that

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Omakanth and Mansur, staff at The Braj Foundation office, Vrindavan, 6.4.2012.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Omakanth and Mansur, staff at The Braj Foundation office, Vrindavan, 6.4.2012

displayed on the official map of India. For residents of Vrindavan their living space has for centuries provided a meaningful 'organic ontology', connecting the world of observable phenomena with a transcendental world of a 'metaphysical reality'. Most mythological narratives on Vrindavan give an image which is hard to find on the external terrain of the town. For many of Vrindavan's residents an engagement with social and environmental concerns is ontologically negotiated and contextualised through Vrindavan belonging to the transcendental realm and being translated into the spatiality of the dham (Stewart 2011). It is very much an imagined space, an 'utopian' narration maybe, that creates faith in the sacredness of the totality of Vrindavan and that, eventually for the pilgrim and resident, seems to bridge the gap, or in other words, seems to reconcile the discrepancy between the distant and the far, the sacred and the profane, the visible and non-visible, the transcendent and the immanent.

The Foundation acknowledges that by virtue of its location within the 'Golden Triangle for Tourism' in north India (that includes Delhi, Agra and Jaipur as its major destinations) and its heritage of temples, Vrindavan has also emerged as a destination for religious and cultural tourism. The town offers many tourists from the big cities a blend of a medieval and modern temple town, whose potential, in the eyes of the national and regional tourism agencies, has yet to unfold fully (UP Tourism 2009). Vrindavan is thus embedded in the larger national religious-cultural tourism and development circuit, and pilgrimage and tourism have become the main sources of income, yet simultaneously sources of pollution and environmental deterioration. Following the directions set out in the National Tourism Policy regarding the promotion of pilgrimage sites for cultural tourism and heritage tourism, the Uttar Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation has identified the Braj region's festivals and sites as prime cultural tourism products for the state. The corporation has two main objectives. The first is to promote pilgrimage sites as tourism destinations and the second is to work with the travel industry and private tourism operators to create 'tourism circuits' and encourage them to provide comprehensive package tours that include transport, accommodation and visits to cultural performances and events in these circuits (U.P. Tourism 2009).

## Conclusion

Contemporary urbanization and religious tourism in Vrindavan are shaped by broad and narrow socio-economic, religious and political processes that arise from 'within and outside' the town. Narratives on these processes

both evoke visions of a past heritage and environment, as well as forming visions for how Vrindavan ought to be. At the same time both the processes and the responses of the people living in the city are fragmentary. NGOs and well informed citizens link the meta-developments on the national plane with the processes on town level, whereas most of the residents direct their attention towards the local events of development and environmental challenges, and the various ways in which they impact their daily life practices. Thus it appears as if today's environmental degradation is not severely affecting the daily routines of religious practitioners and residents in the town and residents continue their life practices without interruption or alteration. People direct their attention towards immediate events that intervene in their daily lives, whereas NGOs and elites seem to connect events and their responses to the broader socio-political processes of the country.

For environmental and cultural activists of Vrindavan urbanization and tourism affect the ecology and devalues the spiritual meaning of the experience and the importance of the rituals for visitors, and negatively affects the sanctity of the place. Like the members of the Braj Foundation who want to create the environment of Vrindavan as it is found in the popular and scriptural imaginaries. They point out that the increasing urbanization of the town and the swelling numbers of picnic yatis<sup>16</sup> has reduced Vrindavan to the status of a religious marketplace. In similar lines, while the Yamuna expressway and other road projects are promoted by the state government to open up avenue for industrial and urban development of the region and to provide the base for convergence to tourism and other allied industries, its construction has been opposed by local initiatives who see these developments as a violent intervention into and an irreversible damage of the sacred landscape. The mythic image of Vrindavan's pristine and pure environment, thus, is inscribed into the eco-activism in town. Environmentalism in Vrindavan, then, features both the transcendent and the immanent, as Haberman (2006) has argued elsewhere.

In the eyes of those actors the meanings of religion and religious institutions have changed considerably over time. Pilgrimage and activities have become a commercial occupation, a commodity, to profit the business sector

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<sup>16</sup> A term which we have encountered several times in interviews with residents of the town. It bears a negative connotation, and is used by locals to refer to the middle and upper class pilgrims and visitors from the nearby cities, 'flooding' into Vrindavan on the weekends and on holidays.

in town. These images and views are strongly embedded in the discourse of several environmental NGOs and individual activists in Vrindavan. The degradation of the environment is connected to socio-economic, religious and political processes within the town itself (micro) as well as within the larger context of the Indian state (macro). Vrindavan is embedded in the larger national religious-cultural tourism and development circuit and pilgrimage and tourism have become the main sources of income yet simultaneously of pollution and environmental deterioration as well. Environmental awareness does not appear to be a major priority of local residents as well as visiting pilgrims. Historically, the socio-spatial and environmental changes in Vrindavan have always been and continue to be related to religious needs, the cultural economy of pilgrimage rituals, and broader socio-economic, religious and institutional processes occurring within and externally to the city (Shinde 2012). Although tourism and economy have always been central to pilgrimage sites, now a new kind of space, associated with leisure and tourism consumption, is being produced.

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