

Understanding Placemaking Practices in Sacred Landscapes for the Conservation of Heritage: Insights from Jeevant Braj, India

Rohan Chaturvedi

RV College of Architecture, India

Email: rc.arch02@gmail.com

Received	Accepted	Published
01.12.2025	22.03.2026	31.03.2026

<https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej-2026-13-02-01>

Abstract

Sacred landscapes represent layered heritage where material structures, ritual practices, collective memory, and performative traditions together shape spatial identity. However, contemporary development pressures and fragmented conservation approaches often reduce such landscapes to stand-alone monuments, overlooking their lived, performative, and narrative dimensions. Nevertheless, such sacred landscapes do still exist. In this context, this paper examines placemaking in sacred landscapes in Braj region in India as a process rooted in the ritual geography and the everyday practices.

The research adopts a qualitative case study approach focused on the Braj region, in Indi. Data collection integrates archival research drawing on historical maps and Puranic and Bhakti texts. It also engages spatial documentation and mapping of key sites, pilgrimage routes, and settlement patterns along with ethnographic observations of rituals, festivals, and performative practices. These are enriched by the oral histories obtained through interviews with community members. A comparative review of published academic studies on other pilgrimage landscapes is used to contextualize the findings.

The study finds that placemaking in Braj manifests as a continuum in which geography precedes and shapes sacred identity through ritual activation, performance, and narrative transmission. Temples function not as isolated monuments but as nodes within a living cultural landscape. It concludes that in Braj, geography is the primary anchor of placemaking and that rituals and performances act as placemaking practices. The settlement and the everyday life afford the sacred space, although this vernacular placemaking systems are vulnerable and face an existential threat. The paper therefore proposes a conceptual framework for heritage practices that promote participation, ritual continuity and spatial storytelling, offering pathways for integrating contemporary interventions in order to sustain cultural resonance and community life.

Keywords: Sacred Landscapes, Living Heritage, Placemaking, Ritual Geography, Collective Memory, Braj, India

Introduction

Vernacular settlements are often repositories of living traditions where placemaking emerges as a continuous social process. The sacred region of Braj in India exemplifies such a landscape, where a layered heritage of tangible structures, ritual practices, collective memory, and performative traditions interweave to shape a unique spatial identity. According to Hindu traditions, whole of India can be regarded as a vast sacred space organized into a network of pilgrimage centers which are the *tīrthas* (Eck 2012; Singh & Rana 2023).

Situated primarily in the trans-Yamuna basin of North India, Braj encompasses key towns like Mathura and Vrindavan alongside numerous villages and natural sites, forming a vibrant pilgrimage circuit attracting millions annually (Chaturvedi n.d.; Singh & Rana 2022). As argued by Sinha (2014), this landscape is simultaneously imagined, enacted, and requires reclamation. The imagined landscape is heavily shaped by centuries of devotional literature taking from Bhakti texts such as the *Garga Samhita*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Chaitanya Bhagavata* and *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu* etc. They describe Braj not merely as geography but as the earthly stage for Krishna's divine play (*līlā*), imbuing every forest, riverbank, and hillock with sacred narratives. The landscape is enacted via ritual circumambulation (*parikramā*) and performances, inscribing places onto the body, but require reclamation due to environmental degradation (Sinha 2014).

These landscapes, however, experience transformations due to contemporary development pressures including rapid urbanisation, increased tourism, commodification of religious experience (Taneja, 2023), and conservation efforts that sometimes isolate monuments or create contested spaces (Gahalot & Gupta, 2024). Such changes risk overlooking the lived, performative, and narrative dimensions integral to the meanings of Braj, as evidenced in reports on ecological stress, challenges to traditional livelihoods, and unregulated construction impacting ritual spaces (Sinha, 2014; Shinde, 2010; Millennium Post, 2024; The Statesman, 2017). In this context, this paper addresses the issue of how architecture and design can operate within these deeply resonant, living contexts without erasing their socio-cultural vitality. Accordingly, the study foregrounds placemaking as the lens through which the interplay of geographies, narratives, and rituals are analyzed to understand how sacred landscapes in Braj manifest. The aim of this study is to examine the vernacular placemaking practices of Braj to understand how its sacred landscapes are produced and sustained through the interplay of geography as interpreted through devotional texts, ritual, performances, and collective memories. It intends to contribute to the understanding of sacred rural culture and life in India, while acknowledging contemporary pressures of commodification.

The objectives are:

- To examine the relationship between geographical features, tangible and intangible aspects, Bhakti narratives, ritual practices (especially *parikrama*), performance traditions, and built forms in the Braj region.
- To identify the placemaking practices embedded within the settlements in Braj through the typologies of sacred spaces and performances, including the 84 *Kos Parikrama* tradition.
- To articulate how placemaking practices in Braj inform contemporary heritage conservation, community engagement, and the regeneration of sacred spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon interconnected theories of 'place', 'placemaking', 'vernacular' landscapes, and 'sacred landscapes'. Following phenomenologists like Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), 'place' is understood as a centre of meaning constructed from lived experiences. As Sinha (2014) applies this to Braj, the landscape is experienced through visual and haptic engagement during ritual enactments, informed by an imagined geography derived from the devotional texts. As Relph (1976) and Norberg-Schulz (1980) articulate, 'placemaking' is the ongoing, collective process of imbuing spaces with meaning. According to Rapoport (1969), 'vernacular' refers to landscapes shaped by cultural traditions and socio-behavioural factors.

Notably, this paper utilizes Mircea Eliade's (1959) distinction between sacred and profane space. Sacred space, according to Eliade (1959), is established through hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred in ordinary reality—creating sacred centres (*axis mundi*) that orient the world, connect cosmic levels, and often link to natural features described in the sacred narratives. Rituals reactivate sacred time: the mythical time of origins (*illud tempus*), allowing the participants to become contemporary with foundational events (Eliade, 1959). Singh builds on this, conceptualizing 'sacredsapes' defined by symbols, traditions, and festivals (Singh & Rana, 2023), within a larger national 'faithscape' (Singh & Rana, 2023). According to Diana Eck (2012), central to the sacredscape of Braj is the principle that physical tangibles serve as mediums for metaphysical connections, where geography itself becomes a theophany, interpreted through the lens of scripture.

Haberman's (1994) ethnography highlights the embodied encounter in Braj pilgrimage (*yātrā*), where the landscape is read as a sacred text reflecting Puranic and Bhakti narratives, and experienced as Krishna's living presence. Pilgrimage becomes a performative act, aligning with anthropological understandings of pilgrimage as a liminal process involving separation, transition, and incorporation (Turner, adapted by Singh & Rana, 2023). Indeed, performance traditions, like the *Rāslīlā*, are central forms of placemaking. As Mason (2009) demonstrates, *Rāslīlā* is embodied theology where actors become divine manifestations (*svarūps*), enacting the divine *līlā* described in the texts like *Garga Samhita* or *Chaitanya Mangala* within ritually charged spaces (*ras mandals*), collapsing the distance between performer, audience, and deity.

The experience is multisensory, shaped by foodscapes—the system of offering, consecration, and distribution of sacred food (*prasāda*)—which forge tangible connections between devotees, deities, and communities (Singh, 2023). The entire cultural heritage reflects a synergy between Nature, agriculture (especially cow veneration), and scripture (Chauhan, 2024), where texts inform the perception and veneration of the landscape. However, as Gahalot & Gupta (2024) note, sacred landscapes can also become contested spaces, requiring regeneration efforts.

Thus, the theoretical framework of this study is constituted of viewing the vernacular settlements being constituted of places, generated through the acts of placemaking imbuing spaces with meaning enacted through every day acts as well as festivals generating symbols, derived through traditions immersed in culture.

Review of Literature

There is an abundance of research that have examined the issue of place and placemaking in vernacular settlements. Among them, the study of Hindu pilgrimage places from a cultural geography perspective has been significantly advanced by Bhardwaj (1973). As noted earlier, the foundational theoretical contributions have come from Mircea Eliade (1959) on sacred space and time. Phenomenological approaches (Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976; Norberg-Schulz, 1980) and vernacular studies (Rapoport, 1969) provide frameworks for understanding experience and culturally embedded practices. Sinha (2014) applies phenomenological and landscape perspectives directly to Indian contexts, including Braj, focusing on imagined, enacted, and reclaimed landscapes.

Within Indian studies, extensive oeuvre of Singh et al. provide a comprehensive framework for understanding sacred geography, developing concepts like 'sacredscape' and 'faithscape.' They analyse sites like Varanasi (Singh, 1997; Singh & Rana, 2011; Singh & Rana, 2023b) and Khajuraho (Singh, 2009). Diana Eck's (2012) *India: A Sacred Geography* offers a pan-Indian perspective interwoven with narrative on the *tīrtha* network.

Historical research of Entwistle (2025) remains foundational specifically concerning Braj. In this connection, Haberman (1994) provides the most definitive ethnographical account of the *Braj Yātrā*'s embodied experience, reading the landscape through textual lenses. In contrast, Singh and Dubey (1988) focus on Mathura's *mandala* structure. Added to this, Gupta (2019) details the history and archaeology of the 84 Kos Parikramā. The textual traditions themselves for example, *Garga Samhita*, *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, *Brihad Bhagavatamrita*, *Bhajana-Rahasya*, *Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu*, *Prem Sagar*, *Chaitanya Mangala*) provide primary

sources describing Vrindavan and Braj as sacred forests, sites of divine *līlā*, filled with natural beauty, and imbued with devotional emotion. Elaborating these Mason (2009) presents performance traditions, particularly the *Rās̄līlā*, as being central, explored as embodied theology and placemaking. Adding to these, Chauhan (2024) examines the synergetic influence of Nature, agriculture, and scripture.

It is notable that contemporary transformations are increasingly studied. For example, Taneja (2023) analyses commodification. In contrast, Shinde (2010) discusses performance transformations and potential 'cacophony'. Adding to this, Gahalot and Gupta (2024) explore sacred landscapes as contested spaces. Moreover, Gulati et al. (2024) examining conservation studies provide data on tangible heritage, pressures, and revitalization strategies. Peleggi's (2021) "devotional conservation" offers a historical lens, while Ray (2019) links ecology and devotion. Pandey (n.d.) inform historical narratives through scribal traditions.

While existing scholarship has examined sacred landscapes through textual traditions, phenomenology, performance, and historical documentation, these strands largely remain analytically separate. Studies on Braj and Vrindavan tend to emphasize either devotional narratives, ritual practices, or spatial descriptions, often treating place as a backdrop rather than as a process produced through their interactions. As a result, there is limited critical examination of how geography, ritual performance, narrative, and everyday practices together constitute placemaking within living sacred landscapes. This gap is particularly evident in relation to Braj, where rich textual and performative traditions are well documented, but rarely interpreted as an integrated placemaking process. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing textual, ethnographic, and spatial analysis to examine placemaking as a continuous and lived practice embedded within the sacred geography of Braj.

Research Methods

This research employs case studies as its primary research method, employing Braj region as a case study. A qualitative, interpretive methodology integrates several data-gathering techniques.

- **Archival Research:** Historical maps were sourced from relevant archives, alongside colonial-era gazetteers, Puranic texts, key Bhakti literature (e.g., *Garga Samhita*, *Chaitanya Bhagavata* excerpts), historical studies on the *Braj Yātrā* (Gupta 2019), and analysis of scribal accounts where available (Pandey n.d.) to understand historical layers, mythological associations, textual descriptions of the landscape, and narrative construction.

Table 1: Bhakti Literature mentions of *Vraja*

Source: Author

Text	Focus on Vrindavan/Vraja	Relevance for Placemaking (Interpretation)
Garga Samhita	Describes Vrindavana as a sacred forest and the location for the <i>rasa</i> dance, holding significant spiritual importance. Vraja is the kingdom/region where the cowherds reside and where a divine figure collaborated to create a mound of edible items.	Establishes the core identity of the place as a sacred, performative stage, linking geography to divine action (<i>līlā</i>).
Chaitanya Bhagavata	Portrays Vrindavana as a sacred place associated with Lord Krishna's pastimes and the presence of Vrindadevi. Vraja is the region/village where Krishna grew up, characterized as his realm of authority.	Reinforces the landscape as a realm of divine love and authority, shaping the perception of the settlements and geography.
Brihad Bhagavatamrita	Describes Vrindavana as an attractive and beautiful location containing numerous ponds where water remains fragrant. Vraja is where the love of the <i>gopis</i> is considered topmost.	Provides the sensorial and emotional descriptions that inform the ritual veneration (e.g., in Kunds) and collective memory.

Bhajana-Rahasya	Focuses on Vrindavan as the location of the solitary <i>nikunjas</i> (groves) where Shri Radha met Shri Krishna. Vraja is the land where Krishna's interactions with the <i>gopis</i> take place.	Directly links specific, intimate spaces (groves) to divine encounters, justifying their treatment as intangible performance spaces.
Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu	Describes Vrindavan as the glorious land where Krishna protects cows and engages in divine pastimes. Vraja is the location whose inhabitants exhibit spontaneous devotion (<i>kevala-rati</i>).	Establishes the link between the landscape, agriculture (cow protection), and the pure devotion that defines the socio-cultural vitality
Prem Sagar (English)	Depicts Vrindavana as a land that appears beautiful, likened to a loving woman adorned with ornaments. Vraja is the home of Shri Krishna and the cowherd people.	Provides visual and emotional narratives that underpin the <i>imagined</i> landscape and collective memory.
Chaitanya Mangala	Portrays Vrindavana Forest as charming, where Lord Krishna is surrounded by <i>gopis</i> , and the land is made of <i>cintamani</i> jewels.	Reinforces the concept of Vrindavan as a spiritual realm, the site of divine pastimes celebrated in various scriptures.
Srila Gurudeva (The Supreme Treasure)	Describes Vrindavan as the sacred forest where the divine pastimes of Shri Radha and Krishna take place. Vraja is the divine realm, the ultimate abode of pure devotion and love.	Underscores the landscape as the ultimate abode of devotion, essential for the embodied practice of pilgrims.
Tiruvaymoli (Thiruvaimozhi)	Mentions Vrindavan as the place where the damsels impersonated the Lord during the <i>Rasa Krida</i> .	Highlights the antiquity and pan-Indian reverence for Vrindavan as the setting for the performative tradition (<i>Rāsīlā</i>)

Table 2: Purana and Itihasa mentions of Vraja

Source: Author

Text	Focus on Vrindavan/Vraja	Relevance for Placemaking (Interpretation)
Vishnu Purana	Describes Vrindavan woods as the place to which Keshin was sent to destroy Krishna. Vraja is the place whose inhabitants decided to move to Vrindavana.	Establishes the origin and movement of the core community, locating key events (e.g., confrontation with Kaliya serpent) that sanctify the geography.
Harivamsha Purana	Describes Vrindavana as an idyllic forest on the bank of Yamuna. Vraja is the home of the cow-herd boys and milkmen, where children are to be raised.	Provides the geographical and social background of the settlement as a natural, abundant, and agrarian cow-herding community.
Devi Bhagavata Purana	Associates the Vrindavana Forest with the origin of Tulasi. Vraja is the village where Krishna was born and raised.	Links the landscape to natural sacred elements (like the sacred Tulasi plant) and reinforces its identity as the birthplace /childhood home of Krishna.

- **Spatial Documentation**

Spatial documentation formed a core component of the research methodology. Field documentations were conducted in Vrindavan and the Govardhan areas between January and March 2024, focusing on mapping key sacred sites and spatial sequences associated with the ritual practices. These included temple precincts (Keshi Ghat, Rangji Temple, Sri Govinda-Devji Temple), riverfront ghats along the Yamuna, sacred groves (*kunjs*), and sections of the Govardhan Hill *parikrama* route. Documentation methods comprised GPS-based mapping, photographic recording, observational sketching, and annotated field notes to record the spatial configurations, ritual use, movement patterns, and degrees of access and restriction. These data were analysed to

interpret vernacular settlement patterns (*gherās* and *rās mandals*) and the relationships between the built forms, ritual performances, and everyday use.

Table 3: Sites Chosen for spatial Documentation

Source: Author

Typology (Focus)	Specific Site	Location	Documentation Focus
Linear Anchor (Ghats)	Keshi Ghat	Vrindavan	Ritual immersion (<i>snāna</i>) and daily <i>darshan</i> on the Yamuna River.
Linear Anchor (Ghats)	Vishram Ghat	Mathura	Historical and ritual anchor point on the Yamuna.
Circumambulatory Route	Govardhan Dham Parikrama Marg	Govardhan Area	Defining the sacred territory of Govardhan Hill (Krishna's body) via movement.
Circumambulatory Route	Vrindavan Dham Parikrama Marg	Vrindavan	Local circuit defining the immediate sacred precinct of Vrindavan.
Sacred Reservoir (Kunds)	Manasi Ganga Kund	Govardhan Area	Jala Tirtha, focus of ritual immersion (<i>snāna</i>).
Sacred Reservoir (Kunds)	Radha Kund & Shyam Kund	Govardhan Area	Paired Jala Tirthas, considered liquid manifestations of Radha and Krishna.
Sacred Grove	Nidhivan	Vrindavan	Space of eternal <i>rasa līlā</i> , maintained through narrative and restriction.
Sacred Grove	Sewa Kunj	Vrindavan	Space maintained through narrative and restriction, linked to divine meetings.
Temple Nexus (Built Form)	Rangji Temple	Vrindavan	Example of a major temple functioning as an <i>axis mundi</i> .
Temple Nexus (Built Form)	Sri Govinda-Devji Temple	Vrindavan	Example of a major temple functioning as an <i>axis mundi</i> .
Vernacular Pattern	Gheras and Ras Mandals	Vrindavan	Vernacular settlement patterns and performance spaces surrounding temples.



Fig. 1: Spatial Documentation of Keshi Ghat

Source: Author, 2024



Fig. 2: Rangji Temple and Sri Govinda-Devji Temple
Source: Author, 2024



Fig. 3: Nidhivan Sacred Grove
Source: Author, 2024

- **Ethnographic Observations:**

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted through repeated site visits in Vrindavan and the Govardhan area between January and March 2024. Observations focused on embodied practices and everyday interactions within the temple precincts, ghats, sacred groves (*kunjs*), and pilgrimage routes. Daily ritual practices (*sevas*) were observed at Keshi Ghat, Sri Govinda-Devji Temple, Radha Raman Temple and the Bankey Bihari Temple, with attention to timing, spatial sequences, and patterns of participation. Major ritual events observed included Holi celebrations in Vrindavan and Ekadashi observances along the Yamuna riverfront, documenting crowd movement, ritual choreography, and temporary spatial transformations.

Performance traditions such as *Raslila* were observed during the evening enactments in temple-adjacent performance spaces, recording performer–audience relationships, use of space, and ritual symbolism. Practices related to food offerings (*bhog* and *prasada*) were documented through the observation of preparation, distribution, and consumption within the temple kitchens and public courtyards.

Observations were recorded through field notes, annotated sketches, and photographic documentation. Informal conversations with the devotees, local residents, and Goswamis (temple priests) supplemented observations, helping to interpret ritual meanings, spatial restrictions, and everyday negotiations within the sacred spaces.



Fig. 4: Darshan of Shri Radha Krishna in blue attire seated on throne at Raas Leela, Vrindavan
Source: Rasik, 2025



Fig. 5: Phool Bangla Seva, Radha Raman Mandir
Source: Author, 2024

- **Oral Histories:**

Ten informal, open-ended interviews were conducted between January and March 2024 with the pilgrims, local devotees, shopkeepers (including sweet sellers), temple attendants, and the residents in Vrindavan and Govardhan. Interviews were conducted on-site within temple precincts, market streets, and pilgrimage routes, and typically lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. Conversations focused on personal memories, interpretations of sacred places, ritual experiences, and perceptions of recent transformations in the sacred landscape. Interviews were documented through handwritten field notes recorded immediately after each interaction; no audio recording was used in order to maintain informality and participant comfort.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their sustained presence and active engagement within the ritual spaces, including temple service, pilgrimage facilitation, or everyday livelihood linked to the sacred sites. The interview sample comprised three pilgrims, three temple attendants, two shopkeepers, and one long-term local residents, and one new resident.

- **Comparative Analysis**

Readings of studies on other Hindu pilgrimage sites (Varanasi, Khajuraho, Puri) and concepts from heritage conservation, contestation (Gahalot & Gupta 2024), and performance studies (Shinde 2010; Mason 2009) were used to contextualize the findings.

Table 4: Comparative Studies Referenced for Contextual Analysis

Source: Author

Site	Key Reference(s)	Focus
Varanasi	Singh (2019); Gahalot & Gupta (2024)	Sacred geography, ritual contestation
Khajuraho	Shinde (2010)	Performance, heritage and tourism
Puri	Mason (2009)	Pilgrimage, ritual movement, place-making

Methodological Synthesis

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology that integrates archival research, spatial documentation, and ethnographic inquiry. This approach is necessitated by the nature of placemaking in the Braj region, where spatial identity is produced through the interweaving of geography, built form, ritual practice, and narrative traditions.

Archival and textual research establishes the mythological and scriptural foundations—drawing from sources such as the *Garga Samhitā* and Purāṇic literature—that ascribe sacred meaning to the Braj landscape and frame it as the earthly setting of Krishna’s *līlā*. Spatial documentation of pilgrimage routes (*parikramā*) and associated sites, including *kunds*, *ghāṭs*, and sacred groves, locates these narratives within a material geography and identifies key hierophanic points. Ethnographic observations and oral histories further capture how the performative traditions, such as *Rāslīlā* and contemporary *parikramā* practices, continue to enact and sustain the sacredness of the landscape.

Together, these methods enable a holistic reading of geography-led placemaking in Braj, grounding the analysis in both the historical narratives and the present-day lived practices.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the comprehensive nature of the research design, certain limitations affect the scope and generalizability of the findings.

- **Limited Generalizability:** As an interpretive qualitative case study focused on selected sites and practices, the findings are not intended to be generalized across the entire 84 *Kos* Braj region.
- **Constraints on *Parikramā* Documentation:** Owing to the time-intensive and expansive nature of the 84 *Kos Parikramā*, detailed fieldwork was concentrated on local pilgrimage circuits in Vrindavan and Govardhan. The larger *parikramā* tradition was therefore examined primarily through historical and textual sources (Gupta, 2019).
- **Qualitative Sampling Bias:** Oral histories were collected through informal and convenience sampling, which may introduce bias. Efforts were made, however, to engage a diverse range of participants, including priests, performers, and local residents, to mitigate this limitation.

Table 5: Research Methods, Data Sources, and Analytical Outputs

Source: Author

Research Method	Data Source	Analytical Output in This Study
Archival & Textual Analysis	Bhakti texts (<i>Garga Samhitā</i> , <i>Puranas</i>), secondary literature	Identification of sacred geography, hierophanies, and symbolic meanings
Spatial Documentation	Mapping of ghats, kunds, <i>parikramā</i> routes, temple precincts	Spatial structuring of sacred anchors and ritual routes
Ethnographic Observation	Daily <i>sevas</i> , festivals, <i>Rāslīlā</i> performances, food offerings	Interpretation of performative placemaking practices
Informal Interviews	Priests (<i>Goswamis</i>), performers, residents, devotees	Contextual understanding of lived ritual practices and continuity

Introduction to the Case Study: The Braj Region

This study examines the placemaking practices in Braj. It reveals a system where geography shapes the sacred identity, activated by rituals and performances, often preceding the formalization of the temple.

According to Sinha, 2014 The landscape functions as an Eliadean sacred space, a layered palimpsest experienced phenomenologically. The Braj region (*Braj Mandal*), investigated as a living sacred landscape is defined by Krishna's *līlā* enacted across the geography comprising the Yamuna, the Govardhan hill, the forests (*vanas*), the groves (*kunjās*), and the water bodies (*kunds*), all richly described in Bhakti literature as inherently sacred and beautiful (e.g., *Garga Samhita*, *Brihad Bhagavatamrita*). Its identity reflects a deep synergy between Nature, agriculture, and scripture (Chauhan, 2024). The primary structuring element is the 84 Kos Parikramā, a tradition rooted in ancient practice and textual descriptions (Gupta 2019), which ritually defines the sacred territory.



Fig. 6: Braj Region in the Indian Subcontinent
Source: Alchetron, 2024

Findings

Analysis of Data: Drawing on the data sources presented, the analysis reveals placemaking across interconnected typologies, consistently reflecting textual pathways as follows.

- **The Linear Anchor: Yamuna River and its Ghats:** Yamuna (goddess) functions as the spine of Braj. Ghats like Vishram Ghat and Keshi Ghat are tangible hierophanies where myth is localized. Rituals continually re-enact these spaces, though pollution challenges their integrity (Sinha, 2014).



Fig. 7: Vishram Ghat, Mathura, Braj, India
Source: Author, 2024

- **The Circumambulatory Anchor: Sacred Hills and Paths:** Govardhan Hill (Haberman, 1994; Eck, 2012) amongst other geographical markers also finds sacredness enacted through *parikramā*. Similarly, the *84 Kos Parikramā* (Gupta, 2019) and the local circuits (Gulati et al., 2024) define the sacred precincts which are the *Punya Kshetra* (Singh & Rana, 2023a). These routes transform the geography into living architecture defined by the movements around the sacred centres (Eliade, 1959).



Fig. 8: Vrindavana Dham Parikrama Marg
Source: Author, 2024

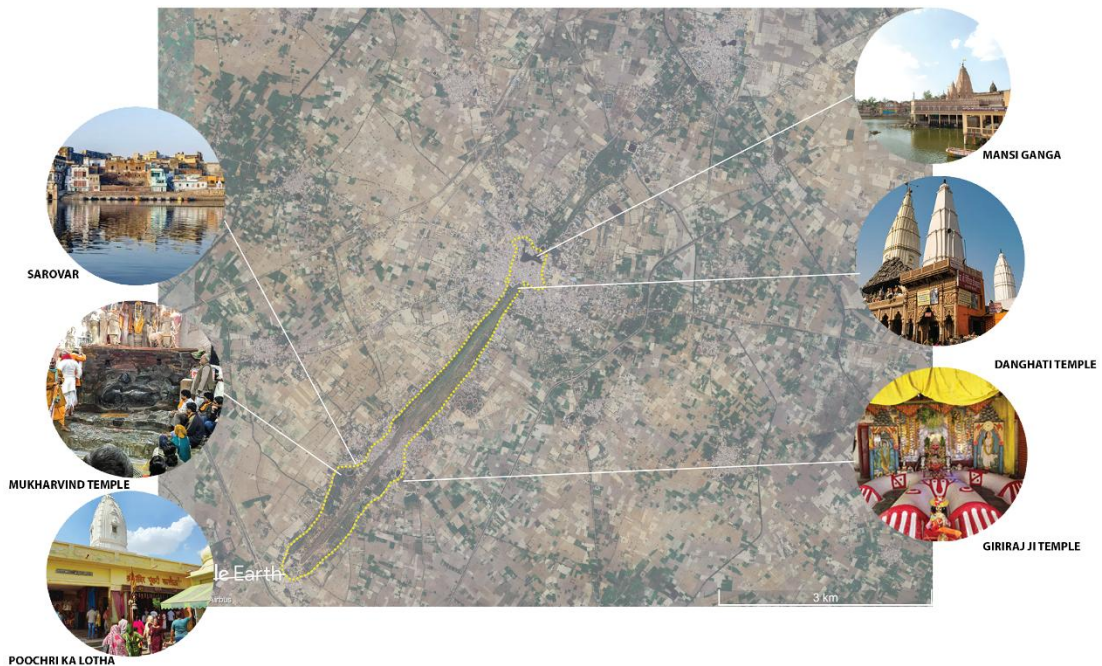


Fig. 9: Govardhan Dham Parikrama Marg
Source: Author, 2024

- The Sacred Reservoir: The Kund as Divine Presence:** Water bodies like Radha Kund, Shyam Kund, Mansi Ganga etc. which are considered liquid manifestations of Radha and Krishna themselves, (Eck 2012) are potent hierophanies which can be called *Jala Tirthas* (Singh & Rana, 2023a). They are described textually as being fragrant and beautiful (*Brihad Bhagavatamrita*). Placemaking centers on ritual immersion (*snāna*) in these. The sites anchor dense socio-economic fabrics, reinforced by 'foodscapes' as articulated by Singh (2023).



Fig. 10: Manasi Ganga Kund, Govardhan Parikrama
Source: Author, 2024

- **The Sacred Grove: The Forest as a Performative Space:** Vrindavan itself is textually conceived as a sacred forest (*Garga Samhita*; *Srila Gurudeva*), filled with beauty and the divine presence. Specific groves like Nidhivan and Sewa Kunj are intangibly the space of eternal *rasa līlā*, maintained through narrative and restriction (Haberman, 1994). Devotional texts describe intimate *kunjas* or *nikunjas* as settings for divine meetings (*Bhajana-Rahasya*). *Ras mandals* within groves serve as stages for *Rāslīlā* performances, where actors become *svarūps*, activating sacred time (Mason, 2009; Eliade, 1959). The *dvādaśa vana* structure the larger *Braj Yātrā* (Haberman, 1994; Gupta, 2019).



Fig. 11: Seva Kunj, Vrindavan
Source: Apna Yatra, 2023

- **The Temple-Geography Nexus and Vernacular Fabric:** Temples or *Sthān Tīrtha*, (Singh & Rana, 2023a) often mark sites already significant, functioning as *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1959). Vrindavan's core evolved around 16th-century Bhakti movement temples embedded within the vernacular precincts (*gheras*).

Table 6: The Placemaking Practices at Braj

Source: Author

Sacred Typology (Place)	Textual Foundation (Interpretation)	Specific Placemaking Practice Observed
The Linear Anchor: The Yamuna River and Ghats	Yamuna is the spine (goddess) of Braj Ghats (e.g., Keshi Ghat) are tangible hierophanies where myth is localized.	Ritual immersion (snāna) and daily <i>darshan</i> continually re-enact the space.
The Circumambulatory Anchor: Sacred Paths	Govardhan Hill is interpreted as the body of Krishna. Routes define the sacred territory (<i>Punya Kshetra</i>).	Embodied circumambulation (<i>parikrama</i>) transforms geography into living architecture defined by ritual movement around the sacred centers.
The Sacred Reservoir: The Kund as Divine Presence	Water bodies (e.g., Mansi Ganga) are liquid manifestations of Radha and Krishna (<i>Jala Tirthas</i>).	Ritual immersion (snāna) and water offerings are the central acts of placemaking. These sites anchor the socio-economic fabric reinforced by 'foodscapes.'
The Sacred Grove: The Forest as Performative Space	Vrindavan is textually conceived as a sacred forest (<i>vana</i>) where eternal <i>rasa līlā</i> occurs. Textual <i>kunjas</i> are settings for the divine meetings.	Rāslīlā performance in <i>ras mandals</i> functions as the core placemaking practice, diminishing the distance between the deities and the devotees
The Temple-Geography Nexus	Temples (<i>Sthan Tirtha</i>) often mark the significant sites functioning as an <i>axis mundi</i> . The core evolved around the 16th-century temples embedded in the vernacular precincts (<i>gheras</i>).	Daily <i>sevas</i> (e.g., <i>bhog</i> , <i>prasāda</i> , <i>Phool Bangla Seva</i>) and festival enactments reinforce the sacred core, embedding divinity within the everyday life.

Field observations and informal interactions with the priests, the performers, and the residents suggest that practices such as *parikramā* and *rāslīlā* are perceived as active spatial enactments rather than symbolic traditions, reinforcing the lived sacred geography of Braj.

These findings support a descriptive continuum of placemaking: Geography interpreted via texts leads to rituals/performances, which is an enactment, activating sacred time in space. This then leads to community economy and a settlement which shapes the vernacular fabric, foodscapes etc. culminating in temple formalizations which itself is an articulation of the center. Geography, imbued with meaning by devotional narratives, is foundational, continually activated by performance and ritual.

Discussion

The geography-led continuum model contrasts with monument-centric approaches. The dispersed network of natural hierophanies of Braj are interpreted through Bhakti texts and activated by embodied rituals like the *84 Kos Parikramā* (Gupta 2019; Haberman 1994). This differs from Varanasi's architecturally dominant riverfront (Singh & Rana, 2023b). The performative dimension (Mason, 2009), deeply rooted in textual descriptions of *līlā*, is central, aligning with Eliade's (1959) concepts and Sinha's (2014) focus on imagined and enacted landscapes. However, as Shinde (2010) cautions, contemporary performances face transformations.

Braj is increasingly a contested space (Gahalot & Gupta, 2024). Commodification (Taneja 2023) transforms experience. Vrindavan exemplifies pressures: pilgrim traffic strains infrastructure; unregulated construction encroaches on *gheras* and *parikramā* paths; pollution degrades the Yamuna and *kunds* (Sinha, 2014), threatening the efficacy of hierophanies described in texts. 'Heritagization' (Singh & Rana, 2023b) risks prioritizing tourism over living traditions. Interventions like the PRASHAD scheme or local revitalization efforts (e.g., Gulati et al., 2024) must navigate these complexities, addressing the living, performative, textually-informed, and sometimes contested Nature of the landscape (Gahalot & Gupta, 2024).

In this context, Peleggi's (2021) offers a lens for supporting continuity. The challenge lies in mediating between conservation and community, including agricultural traditions (Chauhan, 2024) and scribal knowledge (Pandey, n.d.), devotional use informed by Bhakti narratives, commodification, and development, respecting the living presence of the landscape (Sinha, 2014).

Conclusions

This research examined vernacular placemaking practices in Braj by analysing how the sacred landscapes are produced and sustained through the interaction of geography, devotional texts, ritual performance, and collective memory. Drawing on site-specific evidence presented in the findings section (Table 5; Figures 6–7), the study analysed placemaking across key locations including the Yamuna ghats (Keshi Ghat, Vishram Ghat), circumambulatory paths (Govardhan and the 84 Kos Parikramā routes), water bodies (Mansi Ganga and selected *kunds*), sacred groves (Nidhivan), and temple precincts within Vrindavan. These sites were examined through archival sources, spatial documentation, and ethnographic observation of everyday and festival practices such as daily *sevas*, *parikramā*, *Rāslīlā*, and food offerings (*bhog*, *prasāda*).

The findings demonstrate that placemaking in Braj manifests as a geography-led continuum in which devotional narratives first imbue natural features with meaning, which are then activated through embodied ritual and performance, and subsequently reinforced through settlement patterns and everyday socio-economic practices. As shown in the Table 5, rivers, paths, groves, water bodies, and temples function as distinct yet interconnected sacred typologies, each sustained through specific placemaking practices rather than solely through architectural forms.

Field observations at the Yamuna ghats indicate that ritual immersion (*snāna*), daily *darśan*, and seasonal festivals continually re-enact sacred narratives at the river edge, anchoring mythological meanings within lived space. Similarly, circumambulatory practices observed along Govardhan and documented through the 84 Kos Parikramā illustrate how the ritual movements transform the geography into a lived sacred territory (*Punya Kshetra*), where spatial meanings emerge through the repeated bodily engagements rather than monumentality alone. Observations at *kunds* such as Mansi Ganga further show how water-based rituals and offerings sustain sacred presence while simultaneously shaping local economies and everyday rhythms of life.

In the sacred groves such as Nidhivan, the study documents how performative traditions, particularly *Rāslīlā*, operate as recurring placemaking practices through which mythological time (*līlā*) is activated in space. These performances diminish the experiential distances between the devotees and the divine, sustaining sacredness independent of permanent architectural enclosures. Temple precincts in Vrindavan similarly function as placemaking nexuses, where daily *sevas*, festival enactments, and food-related practices embed sacred meanings within the routine social life, reinforcing the continuity between the ritual practices and the settlement forms.

Taken together, the evidence confirms that in Braj, built structures articulate and reinforce a pre-existing sacred geography rather than initiate it. Sacredness is continually produced through ritual repetition, embodied movement, and performative enactments, resulting in a living landscape that is both spatially and temporally dynamic. These findings distinguish the placemaking processes of Braj from monument-centric heritage models, highlighting instead a dispersed, performative, and community-activated sacred landscape.

At the same time, the study identifies growing pressures on this placemaking continuum. Infrastructure expansion, commodification of ritual experience, environmental degradation of rivers and *kunds*, and unregulated constructions along the sacred paths increasingly disrupt the ritual–geographic relationships documented in this research. The findings suggest that conservation and revitalisation efforts in Braj must therefore prioritise the protection of ritual routes, performative spaces, and everyday practices, rather than focus solely on the isolated monuments.

While the study is limited by its qualitative, site-specific scope and reliance on focused fieldwork within Vrindavan and Govardhan, it offers a grounded empirical account of how vernacular placemaking operates within a living sacred landscape. By explicitly linking geography, text, ritual, and performance, this research contributes to broader discussions on heritage conservation, cultural ecology, and the management of contested sacred spaces, particularly in contexts where sacredness is sustained through practice rather than permanence.

Specific Conclusions Derived from the Findings

- **Geography as the Primary Anchor of Placemaking:** In Braj, natural features such as the Yamuna River, Govardhan Hill, *kunds*, and sacred groves function as primary sacred anchors. These elements acquire meanings through devotional texts and are continually activated through the ritual practices observed at sites such as Keshi Ghat, Vishram Ghat, Govardhan Parikramā, Mansi Ganga, and Nidhivan.
- **Ritual and Performance as Placemaking Practices:** Ethnographic observations of daily *sevas*, ritual immersion (*snāna*), circumambulation (*parikramā*), and performative traditions such as *Rāslīlā* demonstrate that sacredness in Braj is produced through repeated embodied actions rather than through monumental architecture alone.
- **Continuum Between Text, Practice, and Space:** Archival and textual sources establish the mythological and devotional framework of Braj, which is translated into lived space through ritual enactment. This continuum is evident in the alignment between the textual descriptions of *līlā* and their spatial manifestations in the groves, temples, paths, and the water bodies.
- **Settlement and Everyday Life as Extensions of Sacred Space:** Temple precincts and surrounding neighbourhoods in Vrindavan illustrate how placemaking extends into everyday practices such as food offerings (*bhog, prasāda*), pilgrimage economies, and festival cycles, embedding the sacred meanings within daily life.
- **Vulnerability of Vernacular Placemaking Systems:** The study identifies pressures from commodification, environmental degradation, and infrastructural interventions that disrupt the ritual routes, water bodies, and performative spaces, threatening the continuity of the geography-led placemaking system.

Recommendations for Design and Heritage Intervention

It is therefore recommended that effective architectural and heritage interventions must adopt a context-specific approach derived directly from the findings of this research, acknowledging the tangible-metaphysical links of Braj. To enrich heritage and foster social engagement, designs must intervene to support cultural continuity and address the contestation by:

- **Respecting Geography as Presence:** Architectural design must respect the geographical features (Yamuna, Govardhan, Kunds) as sacred presence informed by devotional texts.
- **Supporting Ritual and Performance:** Prioritizing the maintenance of infrastructure (e.g. *ghats, parikramā* paths) and spaces (*ras mandals*) that enable the core practices like *parikramā* and *Rāslīlā*.
- **Integrating Ecology and Vernacular Forms:** Addressing environmental degradation (pollution of Yamuna) while engaging the community and respecting the synergy between Nature, agriculture, and scripture.
- **Spatial Storytelling:** Utilizing scriptural narratives to inform spatial design, thus sustaining the cultural resonance of the landscape while integrating the contemporary functions.

Acknowledged Limitations: The limitations of the study include its qualitative scope (findings are interpretive, not generalizable), logistical constraints on fully documenting the entire 84 Kos Parikramā circuit, and reliance on convenience sampling for oral histories.

Directions for Further Research

It is suggested that the following new directions could be pursued for further research.

1. **Comparative Analysis:** Investigating the placemaking continuum in other Krishna pilgrimage sites to refine the transferability and cultural specificity of the model.
2. **Design Intervention Studies:** Action research focused on applying the derived design principles (e.g., spatial storytelling, devotional conservation) in pilot projects to measure their impact on community engagement and cultural continuity.
3. **Economic Impact Assessment:** Quantifying the economic contribution of traditional *parikramā* and performance practices versus large-scale tourism infrastructure.

Acknowledgements

This study received no external financial support. However, the author gratefully acknowledges the support of the local communities, temple authorities, and practitioners in the Braj region for their cooperation and insights during the fieldwork.

Ethical Conduct

This research was conducted in accordance with the standard ethical practices for qualitative fieldwork. All the interactions with the participants, including the informal interviews and observations were undertaken with informed consent, and no personal or sensitive information has been disclosed.

Availability of Data:

The data supporting this study are derived from various archival sources, literature reviews which are mentioned along with field observations, spatial documentation, and informal interviews and candid conversations conducted in the Braj region. While primary field notes and observations are not publicly archived due to their qualitative and context-specific nature, they are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Bhardwaj, S. M. (1983) *Hindu places of pilgrimage in India: A study in cultural geography* Vol. 14. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Business Standard. (2015, May 10) NGT intervenes to save Vrindavan from garbage threat. Retrieved from https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/ngt-intervenesto-save-vrindavan-from-garbage-threat-115050200274_1.html
- Chaturvedi, S. K. (n.d.) *A brief history and Sanskriti of Braj-Bhoomi*. Retrieved from <https://ia903407.us.archive.org/5/items/Pushtimarg/Culture%20Of%20Braj%20%28English%29.pdf>
- Chauhan, A. S. (2024) The cultural heritage of Braj, India: Exploring the synergetic influence of nature, agriculture and scripture. *Creative Saplings*, 3(12), 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.56062/gtrs.2024.3.12.831>
- Dhan Gahalot, R. & Gupta, C. (2025) Regenerating and reclaiming the contested spaces in sacred landscapes. *Archaeologies*, 21(1), 74–100. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-024-09512-w>
- Eck, D. L. (2012) *India: A sacred geography*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Eliade, M. (1959) *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Entwistle, A. W. (2025) *Braj, centre of Krishna pilgrimage*. Vol. (3). Leiden: Brill.
- Gulati, R., Sehgal, V. & Sanyal, A. (2024) Revitalization of cultural landscape: Barsana in Braj Mandal. *World Journal of Innovative Research*, 16(6), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.31871/WJIR.16.6.6>

- Gupta, V. K. (2019) *Braj 84 Kos Parikramā: History, tradition and archaeology*. [Publisher unknown].
- Haberman, D. L. (1994) *Journey through the twelve forests: An encounter with Krishna*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mason, D. V. (2009) *Theatre and religion on Krishna's stage: Performing in Vrindavan*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Millennium Post. (2024, July 18). Mathura–Vrindavan hit by rising Yamuna. Retrieved from <https://www.millenniumpost.in/big-stories/mathura-vrindavan-hit-by-rising-yamuna-626408>
- Norberg-Schulz, C. (1980). *Genius loci: Towards a phenomenology of architecture*. New York, NY: Rizzoli.
- Pandey, S. (n.d.). *Scribal traditions of Braj: Bridging literary cultures and historical narratives*. Retrieved from <https://bharatiya-jnana-sarita.info/pdfs/DrSurabhiPandey.pdf>
- Peleggi, M. (2021). A theory of devotional conservation: A preliminary proposal. *Academia Letters*, Article 189. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL189>
- Prem Sāgar; Bhāgavata Purāṇa; Bhajana-Rahasya; Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu; Bṛhad-Bhāgavatāmṛta; Chaitanya Bhāgavata; Chaitanya Maṅgala; Garga Saṁhitā; Tiruvāymoḷi. (2025). *Vrindavana – Concept and References in Scripture*. Wisdom Library. Retrieved from <https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/vrindavana>
- Rapoport, A. (1969) *House form and culture*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Ray, S. (2019) *Climate change and the art of devotion: Geoaesthetics in the land of Krishna, 1550–1850*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Relph, E. (1976) *Place and placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Shinde, K. A. (2010) Sacred landscape, sacred performances: Connection and cacophony. In R. P. B. Singh (Ed.), *Holy places and pilgrimages: Essays on India* (127–146). Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276849445_Sacred_Landscape_Sacred_Performances_Connection_and_Cacophony
- Singh, R. P. B. (1997) Sacred space and pilgrimage in Hindu society: The case of Varanasi. In R. H. Stoddard & A. Morinis (Eds.), *Sacred places, sacred spaces: The geography of pilgrimages* (191–207). Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press. Retrieved from: <https://archive.org/details/sacredplacessacr0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up>
- Singh, R. P. B. (2009) *Cosmic order and cultural astronomy: Sacred cities of India*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/14952692/04_PECU_Singh_Rana_P_B_2009_Cosmic_Order_and_Cultural_Astronomy_Sacred_Cities_of_India_Foreword_Prof_John_McKi_m_Malville_U_S_A_Planet_Earth_and_Cultural_Understanding_Series_Pub_4_Cambridge_Scholars_Publishing_Newcastle_upon_Tyne_U_K_xvi_249pp_15_tables_72_figures
- Singh, R. P. B. (2023) Symbolism, sacrality and foodscapes in Hindu pilgrimage systems. In D. Munro, N. Buttigieg & D. H. Olsen (Eds.) *Food and the pilgrim: Nourishment for pilgrims and faith-based tourists* (201–220). Oxford: Peter Lang. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/105368594/825_23_Singh_Rana_P_B_2023_Symbolism_Sacrality_and_Foodscapes_in_Hindu_Pilgrimage_System_In_Dane_Munro_Noel_Buttigieg_and_Daniel_H_Olsen_eds_Food_and_the_Pilgrim_Nourishment_for_Pilgrims_and_Faith_Based_Tourists_pp_201_220_chapter_12_Peter_Lang_Oxford
- Singh, R. P. B. & Dubey, D. P. (1988) Mathurā Mandala: Territory and sacrality. In T. P. Verma, S. Saran & D. P. Singh (Eds.), *Yuga-Yugina Braj: A history of Braj region* (189–200). Varanasi: Bhartiya Itihas Samkalan Samiti. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320097797_080-88_Singh_Rana_PB_and_Dubey_DP_1988_c_Mathura_Mandala_Territory_and_Sacral

- ity in Verma T P Saran S and Singh DP eds Yuga-Yugina Braj A History of Braj Region Bhartiya Itihas Samkalan Samiti Varanas
- Singh, R. P. B. & Rana, P. S. (2022) Geography of tourism and pilgrimages. In S. C. Rai (Ed.), *Progress in Indian geography: A country report, 2016–2022* (230–267). New Delhi: INSA.
- Singh, R. P. B. & Rana, P. S. (2023a) Geography of Hindu pilgrimage places (Tirthas) in India. In L. Lopez (Ed.), *Geography of world pilgrimages* (297–322). Cham: Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32209-9_14
- Singh, R. P. B. & Rana, P. S. (2023b) The riverfrontscapes of Varanasi, India: Architectural symbolism, transformation, and heritagization. *EdA Esempi di Architettura*, 10(2), 244–269. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368569844_78423_Singh_Rana_PB_and_Rana_Pravin_S_2023_The_Riverfrontscapes_of_Varanas_India_Architectural_symbolism_transformation_and_heritagization_EdA_Esempi_di_Architettura_International_Journal_of_Architec
- Sinha, A. (2006) *Landscapes in India: Forms and meanings*. New Delhi: Foundation Books.
- Sinha, A. (2014) The sacred landscape of Braj, India: Imagined, enacted, and reclaimed. *Landscape Journal*, 33(1), 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.33.1.59>
- Taneja, L. (2023) Losing and finding Braj: Commodification and entrepreneurship in the sacred land of Krishna. *Religions*, 14(5), 643. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050643>
- The Statesman. (2017, August 25) Unbridled construction erodes Vrindavan's ecology. Retrieved from <https://www.thestatesman.com/cities/unbridled-construction-erodes-vrindavan-s-ecology-1486533898.html>