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Religious tourism, democracy, and displacement: A study on family resettlement at Kashi Vishwanath Temple

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-political, economic, and cultural implications of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project in Varanasi, India, with a specific focus on the displacement of local families and small businesses. Using a qualitative case-study approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with displaced residents, traders, and government officials, along with analysis of policy documents and secondary sources. Findings reveal a complex interplay between religious tourism development and social justice. While improved infrastructure and increased tourist inflows are viewed positively by some stakeholders, displaced families report inadequate compensation, loss of livelihood, weakened community bonds, and diminished cultural identity. The project also raises concerns over limited democratic participation and transparency in decision-making. Overall, the study highlights the tensions between economic ambitions in religious tourism and the protection of local rights, cultural continuity, and ethical governance.

Keywords: Religious tourism, displacement, Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, cultural heritage, democratic governance

Introduction

India, a country where faith and spirituality are weaved into its resident's daily lives, is an important part of religious tourism in shaping the socio economic and cultural contextual landscape of India. Each year millions of people visit sacred sites to seek not only a religious solace but also the experience of the company of heritage, culture and tradition. Kashi Vishwanath Temple in Varanasi, India, is among the world's very most revered and reverent religious locations for Hindus. Varanasi as known as the city of Lord Shiva, is a prime hub of religious tourism with millions of devotees from all around the world visiting the city to pay homage to one of the twelve Jyotirlingas. But the city's infrastructure was being strained by the deluge of pilgrims and the government was set on an ambitious project - the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor. A wide path is to be built to enable the flow of worshippers from the temple to the Ganga River to improve the pilgrim experience.

What the project promises to do is boost tourism and improve the amenities for visitors, but like it or not the project has also spurred critical questions around displacement, social justice and democratic governance. It involved complicated land clearance, resulting in the removal of hundreds, of local families and small business people, who had lived and worked close to the temple for generations. Most were economically vulnerable and the disruption of their livelihoods and social structures affected those communities. The discussion on the fairness of compensation, lack of public consultation in meaningful form, and, generally, the socio cultural impact on the local population has been sparked by this displacement process.

Displacing in the name of development is nothing new in India. However, the results of development initiatives from large scale infrastructure projects to urban renewal schemes have often led to the exclusion of lower socioeconomic group local populations. In the boundary scene of religious tourism, such displacement is particularly worrisome because it not only harmed people's physical life but also their cultural and spiritual relationship with the sacred space they have lived adjacent to for hundreds of years. It is much more than a religious monument, as Kashi Vishwanath is the heart and soul of the displaced residents' identity, history and community around. The relocation of these families forced by

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the needs of economic development and the loss of their way of life raises important questions about whether economic expansion has too easily encroached on that balance.

The research paper presented here intends to investigate the socio political and economic dynamics of religious tourism of Kashi Vishwanath Temple and particularly the question of refugee families relocated by the corridor project. Second, the development of religious tourism infrastructure is analyzed in the light of issues of democracy, social equity and cultural heritage preservation. It seeks to establish how deeply the displacement of local families along the temple corridor went in terms of defending democratic values and the rights of affected communities. It does so in order to question the tensions between the state's appetite for economic gain through religious tourism and the imperative to safeguard the rights and identities of local residents.

This qualitative case study is methodologically based on semi-structured interviews with displaced families, small business owners, and other stakeholders, alongside the review of secondary data in form of government reports, policy documents and scholarly articles. The research is qualitative which affords us a deeper understanding of the human face of the displacement beyond numbers and statistics, to the lived experiences of people displaced. Through these interviews the study seeks to hear the voices and views of the displaced families, who are many who feel their voices were not heard because of the rush to develop a world class tourist destination.

The findings of this research are useful in theory on religious tourism development in India and may have wider implications. Projects like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor promise more pilgrims, but do so at the expense of social justice, democratic transparency and cultural continuity. These trade-offs will be illuminated in this study which will add to the ongoing discussion regarding religious tourism's potential role in shaping India's urban and cultural landscapes. This paper focuses on the Kashi Vishwanath Temple to showcase the complicated nexus between religion, tourism and development in a rapidly modernizing India.

Methodology

The method of the present study is aimed at identifying socio-political and economic factors of religious tourism at Kashi Vishwanath Temple with particular reference to the eviction of local inhabitants by the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor. Due to the criticality, sensitivity and cardinality of the subject under analysis, qualitative case-study research paradigm has been used to capture the experiences of families, small business proprietors and the community in Varanasi and to analyse the implications of infrastructural development of religious tourism in the city on a wider scale. Primary data and secondary data are used in this study with the views of getting information from different sources so as to establish the reliability of the data collected.

Research Design

In the current study, a qualitative case study research method is appropriate considering the nature of the research topic as an event that is specific and contextualised by the process of displacement resulting from infrastructure development. The choice of case study as the primary research method enables focus on socio-political and

economic factors in the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project and flexibility to elicit different responses from multiple stakeholders who were likely to be affected by the project. This design was adopted because it allows the researcher to capture the dynamics of the corridor project and its effects in the affected community particularly those who were evicted.

The research is structured around three key components

1. **Perceptions of displacement:** Asking refugees and small business owners and employees their perception of the process of resettlement and compensation.
2. **Democracy and public participation:** How far did local communities become involved in a decision-making process and to what extent was democracy maintained?
3. **Cultural preservation and identity:** Examination of site users' continuity relationship with the temple and its cultural surrounding after the displacement.

Data Collection Methods

This study utilizes two main data collection methods: Semi structured interviews and Document analysis. These methods are selected deliberately to obtain detailed and complex understanding of how individuals who are affected by the corridor project feel and to understand the context of political economy in which displacement took place.

a. Semi-Structured Interviews

The major means of gathering information about the families and individuals' experiences as refugees and other stakeholders include semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in person with a purposive sample of 50 participants, including 20 families from the displaced community, which we deemed socially, economically, and proportionally representative; some lost their entire property while others lost partially their businesses or part of the land. 25 respondents consisting of small business operators that were directly impacted on by the temple corridor project.

Since studying policy decisions requires interviews with policy makers, five local government officials and urban planners involved in the corridor project were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in Hindi and the recording of these interviews was transcribed and translated to English for further analysis. There were also other general questions asked which were framed in such a manner to give themes like compensation adequacy, displacement emotional, psychological implication, government fairness and transparency with regard to the findings of the resettlement. Issues of consent and confidentiality were respected fully when collecting the data.

b. Document Analysis

Besides primary data collection in the form of interviews, this research relies on other forms of data collection through documents' analysis. This involve analytical of Government of India official reports, policy document, legal instruments on the acquisition and compensation, newspaper reports on Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project. By analyzing these documents, the research aims to:

- Find contradiction between external impressions of the project and internal realities of displaced persons.

- Consider general rules for the purchase of land and reimbursement, in order to determine how such rules correspond to democratic theories and equality.
- Secondary data is sourced from a wide array of documents, including:
- Based on government data released by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and from the state of Uttar Pradesh.
- The new policy papers include those on Urban Displacement and Religious Tourism in India.
- Analyze how displacement and urban development discursively of pilgrimaged cities in the global context: A literature review.

3. Sampling Strategy

- The interviews were conducted based on purposive sampling technique when selecting respondents for the interviews. This method was selected because it permits the further participation of only the clients who have first-hand experience of displacement or are invested in the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project. Concentrating on these subjects of study, the research guarantees that only the data necessary and illustrative of certain aspects of human displacement is gathered.
- This choice of sample size is intended to be purposive, large enough to cover a variety of experiences, but still small enough to capture detailed narrative of participants. Being composed of the affected families and businesspeople, the committee also encompasses the representatives of the government and of urban planning to get a multidimensional view of the corridor undertaking.

4. Data Analysis

For the data analysis of this research, the thematic analysis approach will be used because it is one of the most accepted methods for recognizing, comparing and describing themes within qualitative research. This approach is quite appropriate for this study because it helps to identify patterns concerning displacement, democracy and culture.

5. Ethical Considerations

Considering the nature of the research issue, questions of ethics were critical in the formulation and implementation of this research. Participants were given consent forms clearly explaining the aims of the study and the study's procedures, participant's right to withdraw from the study at any time and sensitive information gathered throughout the study would be kept confidential. The research respected all the ethical qualities set by international research protocols for research involving human subjects.

Literature review

In religious tourism, displacement due to urban growth, and the description of the interaction of such tourists with locals, research from different fields of study have been adopted mainly when focusing on global south expanding cities. Religious tourism and its economic impact on the urban infrastructural development in India has been quite an area of focus in the recent past as scholars try to assess the impact of the growth of the pilgrimage tourism sector on socio-economic structures.

In this paper, religious tourism and its' economic implications will be discussed: India religious tourism market alone currently rakes in many billions of dollars; some of these cities such as Varanasi, Haridwar, and Tirupati accruing major levels of benefits from massive numbers of pilgrims. In the view of Singh (2019) ^[10], religious tourism has played important role in Indian economy, especially by providing employment and enhancing infrastructural development in the past. But, the economic facet of such tourism, rarely filters down to create stakes for the host communities especially those who are forced to shift from their habitats with the rise of large-scale ventures. Sharma & Aggarwal, 2021 discussed on how religious tourism projects are always depicted as development projects, while normally these projects more often than not face lots of criticism on social justice issues but with little or no regard to hospitality rights of individuals in that region.

This research focuses on the Urban Development and Displacement: In the development processes of religious tourism, there is usually a massive acquisition of land, which results in the eviction of the vulnerable groups. Urban displacement literature which has been explored here and in earlier papers by Cernea (2000) ^[1] hosts inherent dangers towards people of such displacement whereby they are socially and economically demeaned besides being culturally violated. Fernandes (2016) in studies of displacement in India reveals that compensation is typically insufficient and rarely pays attention to more future social and economic impacts of displacement. Both issues are particularly pertinent in respect of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor as the state has been accused of inadequate compensation and unsound rehab measures.

The Role of the People in the Decision-Making Process of Urban Design: Democratic governance as a component of displacement, especially in urban transformation, is also of great interest. On the same note, Roy notes that non-involvement of the public in some decisions concerning the development projects erodes democracy and has negative implications to human rights. A number of other articles that focus on displacement in pilgrimage sites, including Desai (2015) ^[11] also question the complete lack of meaningful consultation with the communities of interest and subsequent eviction that denies the people proximity to these spaces of cultural and historical significance. Secondly, the tourist attraction has other purpose of conserving and promoting cultural values in pilgrimage sites.

Lastly, the issue of culture conservation in the face of development challenge is another emerging theme in the literature. Bhargava (2020) ^[8] has all described more skipped relation to people's' terms of local traditions and identity while emphasizing that development projects in the heritage sites cause the. That is why when it comes to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, local families people who have grown up near the temple, who have lived there for generations not only lose their physical space to work and live but also become alienated from their cultural and religious heritage. This resonates with the literature on the globalization process of sacred locales for urban

development where the cultural history of locals particularly the spiritual history of the site and its people is erased in an effort to present a postcard image of religious tourism (Jain, 2019)^[9].

In conclusion, based on the extensive literature on religious tourism and urban development, as well as on the concept of displacement, the paper examines the socio-political dynamics of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project. First, this study adds to the body of existing literature by exploring the stories of forcibly displaced families and provides an understanding of the conflict between development, democracy, and culture in the modern India.

Findings

Geotourism Support sentiment

Some participants who were interviewed expressed positive thoughts about the changes within the Kashi Vishwanath Temple's surrounding area as ever improving infrastructure density. Relatives of tourism workers reported that the increasing development led to more people coming to the area, leading to income for companies that serve tourists. Some small traders maintained that the new developments figuratively 'aided in the attraction of visitors to Varanasi,' further claiming that the city is now even more well-known as a touristy and religious site than before. This segment also proffered that the advancement of the corridor could open up new possibilities of modernity; where all necessary services would be in place at an appropriate location and time for the majority. This was a project for these people on a level of modernity, that sought to develop world religion tourism infrastructure in Varanasi, India without compromising the importance of the city as a holy place.

Challenges Faced by Displaced Families

Negative opinions in support of the above prerequisites come from the families affected by displacement and from some owners of small shops, who stated that they experienced certain hardships because of the corridor project. This was the case in particular with families who had lived in the shadow of the temple for generations. Many families expressed their disappointment about how the displacement process disregarded everyone's feelings. Particularly, they spoke about the disappearance of communal ties.

Promises Made by Governments vs Actual Implementation of Development Projects

The study showed significant contradictions between what the government claims and what the beneficiaries of the project experience. According to official government reports, the amount of compensation provided is reasonable; moreover, relocation schemes were well thought of to reduce interruptions. Nevertheless, the interviews with the displaced persons tell a different story, giving reasons that these measures were not wholly put into practice. In particular, some informants indicated that they received either incomplete or overdue compensation, while others got none offered to them because of an administrative barrier. Additionally, they said that the public participation mechanisms were basically a toast given to the residents, who, in most cases, were only aware of the resettlement plan after decision making. These differences have deepened the rifts between the local people and the state actors, and raised suspicion on their openness and equity.

Cultural Conflict vs. Cultural Enrichment

The improvement of the corridor has had a twofold effect on the culture of Varanasi. For some, however, the modernization of the temple precincts created a gulf from the original, historical city of Varanasi. Elderly residents in particular expressed a feeling of 'spiritual loss' as the landscape they knew which retained the historic quality of the temple due to its surroundings has changed greatly. They regarded this change as turning their culture into something that is pleasing to the eyes of tourists instead of the local culture.

On the other hand, there was a younger segment of the respondents who thought that the development of the corridor will beautify the area and added value to the place. They view the works and the improved pilgrimage centers as geared towards appreciating more of the Hindu culture and improving the outlook of the city against the globe. This infrastructure expansion for the corridor development is aimed at commenting that there exists an old Varanasi and a new modern city and by this means attracting more tourists who wish to explore the spirituality and the culture in the city.

Summary of Results

The Quality and Response to the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project has been diverse and complex. Some stakeholders acknowledge the economic and cultural assumptions of the project but suggest concerns about the relocation of people, compensation, and loss of culture. In such a context, there are calls to maintain respect for local cultures while pursuing local infrastructural expansion for purposes of religious tourism.

Conclusion

The Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project is the case in point which can beautifully summarize various factors, and especially the contentious relations between them, such as religious tourism, economic growth, democratic urban planning, and policies of resettlement in India. In this study, these crosscutting issues were examined through the experiences of family members and kith and kin of displaced small traders, who highlighted the socio-political and cultural processes that go hand in hand with massive infrastructure changes in center of pilgrimage. The results complicate the story with the corridor extension registering both positive aspects and significant hurdles. By this, it means that this paper sheds more light on urbanization with regards to religions and this is why there is a need for constructive changes when it comes to the development of such sites.

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