

Myth and Placemaking in Vernacular Settlements: Insights from Vrindavan, India

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Abstract

Vrindavan in the Braj region in India, associated with Lord Krishna's *lila* (play), evolved over half a millennium into a pilgrim town on the banks of the River Yamuna. The coded language of myths and their grounding in riverfront groves preserves collective memories and represents living heritage. The northeastern part of Vrindavan's historic core on the Yamuna Riverfront offers great opportunities for exploring such living heritage. In this context, this paper examines the Northeastern bank of the Yamuna, and its cluster of heritage sites to reveal the myths created and sustained in these places.

The research employs participation observation and unstructured interviews as research tools to study the ways in which devotees perceived and interacted with places. Three sites—Nidhi Van, Radharaman Temple, and Keshi Ghat—each representing an urban type were the focus of detailed observations and documentation since they exist in the most visible and iconic section of the riverfront, lined by historic palaces and temples. The river can be accessed from there. It also employed literature review of published sources, mapping of heritage precincts in the historic core with the aid of satellite images, personal observations and visual documentation through fieldwork.

Research revealed that myths are enacted by devotees in 'making' places through active engagement with the physical environment. Built environment and the riverfront are transformed in the process of producing the ephemeral landscapes, in making places and adding to the permanent structures already in place. These cultural practices are salient in sustaining collective memories of Krishna's play in Vrindavan. However, the historic core is currently facing many challenges as a result of increasing religious tourism. The paper argues that preserving it as a historic urban landscape entails untangling the complex connections between tangible and intangible aspects of heritage, especially the important role of place narratives in shaping beliefs, values, and ritual practices.

Keywords: Place-making, Place narratives, Living heritage, Temples, Monuments, Riverfront.

Introduction

Myths are archetypal stories providing insights into the human conditions. As symbolic representations that shape collective beliefs and values, they serve as a way to explore universal human experiences (Frye, 2015). They are key to ‘finding’ places which contain the possibility of an encounter with the sacred in an otherwise profane realm (Campbell, 1968). India has a rich tradition of storytelling, and its rich corpus of myths are grounded in its hills, rivers, and forests (Eck, 2012; Sinha, 2006). Place-based myths hold collective memories of Gods, heroes, and sages told and retold to countless generations. Vrindavan in Braj region, associated with Lord Krishna’s *lila* (play), is a prime example of coded language of myths and their grounding in the Yamuna riverbank groves. Vrindavan evolved over half a millennium from a natural landscape of groves into a densely built pilgrim town. The riverfront landscape was transformed over time into the historic core of Vrindavan with temples built to house deities at those places. Today, the oldest sixteenth temples are preserved as historic monuments by the Archaeological Survey of India while those built in the eighteenth century and later are active sites of worship.

Vrindavan is a rapidly expanding pilgrim town as a result of increasing religious tourism. Its historic core of monumental temples on the banks of the River Yamuna is currently facing many challenges. Preserving it as a historic urban landscape entails understanding the complex connections between tangible and intangible aspects of heritage, especially the important role of place narratives in shaping beliefs, values, and ritual practices. The paper aims at investigating the links between myths and places from a phenomenological perspective using qualitative research tools. Its objectives are:

1. To identify the links between myths and places and how that impacts the experience of places in general.
2. To identify the links between myths and places and how that impacts the experience of places in the historic core of Vrindavan.



Fig. 1: View of Keshi Ghat

Source: Author

Theoretical Framework

As the religious historian Mircea Eliade (1959) points out, understanding the connection between places and myths is key to exploring the phenomenology of the sacred. Places are anchors of stories of divine prowess and devotees are bound to places and place-deities in participation mystique, a kind of affective engagement caused by and inducing intense emotional states (Coleman, 2021). Place stories in oral legends, written texts and other cultural productions guide the embodied perception of actual sites during the pilgrimage by the devotees. According to Sinha (2014), the sensual engagement of the body with the built environment and with the ritual objects charged with sacral power is guided by and also reinforces *bhakti bhav* (devotional feelings). In the phenomenological perspective, all human experiences has a spatial grounding. According to Heidegger (1962), existential or lived space is created and possessed in the very act of building. Places are experienced in the flux of time connecting the sense of “now” with the past and the future. Space and time together form the framework for place experience. This research employs this theoretical perspective to examine this issue.

Research Methods

This research employs qualitative research methodology for studying place experiences. It is wholistic in its approach and is therefore appropriate (Cranz, 2016). It employs case studies within which participation observations and unstructured interviews were employed as research tools to study the ways in which devotees perceived and interacted with the places. The Northeastern bank of the Yamuna, and its cluster of heritage sites was selected for study since it is the most visible and iconic section of the riverfront, lined up by historic palaces and temples. From there, the river can be easily accessed. Three sites—Nidhi Van, Radharaman Temple, and Keshi Ghat—each representing an urban type were the focus of detailed observations and documentation.

Mixed methods involving literature review of published sources, mapping of heritage precincts in the historic core with the aid of satellite images, personal observations and visual documentation in fieldwork were used. The three selected sites were studied in detailed observations of pilgrim activities and informal and unstructured interviews with the temple priests. These observations were carried out by the second author when she participated in the rituals of the temple.

Findings

Case Studies: Places

As discovered through observations, places, known as *lila sthals*, has preserved the memory of the riverbank groves in Vrindavan as settings of specific events (Maharaja, 2007) such as Krishna’s trysts with Radha and other *gopis* (cowherdresses), and his killing of the horse-demon Keshi. These stories are widely known and narrated to every visitor. In place legends, the tree is both a metonymic form of Krishna and a setting for his *lila*. Individual trees in the riverfront groves function as memory markers of Krishna’s play; Shringar Vat marking the place where he adorned Radha with flowers, Vanshi Vat where he played the flute, and Kadamb tree where he hid with the clothes of *gopis* bathing in the river. On the Yamuna banks in a clearing in the grove, Krishna has performed the *maharaas* with the *gopis* which is a circular dance in the autumn night.

The literature review of published sources on Braj shows that when collective memory of Krishna’s life on earth began to fade, places such as the riverbank groves in Vrindavan where Krishna once played with Radha and their friends and subdued demonic forces of Nature played a crucial role in retrieving it (Entwistle, 1987; Maharaja, 2007). *Vigrahas* (statues), as essential form (*svarup*) of Krishna as well as the places where they were discovered, function as memory traces. Thus, the place established by the bodily presence of Krishna in a *vigraha*, never loses its sanctity, and is therefore never forgotten (Holdrege, 2015). Place findings by saints include the discovery of Gopinath deity under Vanshi Vat by Madhu Pandit, and Banke Bihari deity by Swami Haridas in Vishakha Kund in Nidhi Van (Entwistle, 1987). One of the twelve *shaligrams* (ammonite) Gopal Bhatt found in Gandak River is believed to have turned into the Radha Raman

deity in *tri-bhanga* posture (threefold bending form) under a tree in 1542 CE. Sites of discovery are commemorated as *prakartan sthal* (place of revelation) indicative of the belief that Krishna is ever-present in Vrindavan in a sentient landscape, trees and water bodies are transmutable into his divine form, and his *lilas* are visible to the believer (Haberman, 2013).



Fig. 2: *Lila sthalis*

Source: Author

The natural landscape was transformed over time into the pilgrim town of today when temples were built to commemorate legends of Krishna's youthful adventures. Temples have commemorated the *lila sthals* and has housed the *vigrahas* in the sixteenth century. Worshipping deities was the focus of the *bhakti* (devotion) tradition, and temples designed between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Vrindavan have responded to this development (Nath, 1996). The temple or *devalaya*, which is the residence of the deity, commemorates the *lila-sthal* and is secondary to it; it would lose its significance if and when it no longer houses the deity, but another temple would be built again close-by for a new deity thus demonstrating the power of place.

After the flight of deities in the late seventeenth century following the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's desecration of Vrindavan temples, a new temple form has emerged and has become widely prevalent in Rajasthan and Gujarat in response to the changed political reality and new modes of devotional worship (Nath, 1996; Jain, 2007). It has been based on the traditional residential type—*haveli*—found in Northern and Western India consisting of one or more courtyards around which living spaces would be organized. However, this being a house of a God, has had a *garbhagriha* facing the East and the arcades on the other three sides of the courtyard in a tri-partite composition. While no domes or soaring *shikar* towers drew attention to the building, the entry gate known as *gokhe* is emphasized by porches on either side of the main door and the *jharokhas* (balconies) above. This introverted building type, combination of temple and house, has become the norm in Vrindavan; most temples built in the historic core in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the new Radharaman Temple built in 1826 CE are based on this model.

The urban typology of the historic core consists of *ghera* (walled enclosure) of residential structures that has evolved around the main *haveli* temple, and *kunjs* and *ghats* (steps and landings) for access to the Yamuna. The *kunj* (literally bower) has been enclosed with creepers and vines and is distinct from the *van* (forest) around it. It was a nest-like space of retreat for love-play of Krishna and Radha in *bhakti* literature and paintings. From its beginnings as a hut in the grove to a house

containing the grove in its courtyard (Habib and Habib, 2019), the built *kunj* represents the reification of the archetypal image of clearing in a grove where Krishna made love to Radha in a bower. The divine and erotic connotation of a natural setting are represented in what Ray (2019) calls the ‘vegetal aesthetic of plants, vines, and flowers’ in architectural form, particularly that of the sanctum carved with floral vines and flowering buds.

The *kunj* in the 19th century has been primarily a private dwelling of the royal families and wealthy nobles who had wished to spend time in Vrindavan and has been built in the *haveli* pattern of double-storied or triple-storied arcades (one of which had the sanctum) around one or more spacious courtyards with a *tulasi* pedestal shrine and trees. It is entered through an elaborately designed gateway. Its riverfront facade consisting of open arcades and *jaalis* (screens), projecting porticoes and *jarokhas*, and *chattris* (pavilions) have been designed to frame views to the Yamuna and is fronted by *ghats* (steps with landing) on the Yamuna.

The *ghats* consist of stairs between pairs of *burjes* (octagonal piers), extending into the river with *tibaris* (triple arched pavilion) below and domed *chattris* above. The arcaded *burjes* provide private access to the river for women to do ritual bathing and *chattris* above them offered a vantage point to enjoy the scenic views; a rhythm has been established in their repetition along the riverbank. Keshi Ghat stretch has the most spectacular *kunjs* and *ghats* built as a unified composition by Jat rulers in a syncretic architectural style of Indo-Islamic forms: domes, cusped arches, and tapering columns combined with *bangladar* roofs, *chajjas* (projective eaves) and *jaalis* of Rajput buildings (Sinha, 2023). Rani Kishori Kunj and Rani Lakshmi Kunj at Keshi Ghat have been named after the queens of Jat chieftains--Ranjit Singh and Randhir Singh—descendants of Badan Singh who has also built the oldest *kunj* in the row. These three *kunjs* together with the Pandavali Kunj are the backdrop to a very active riverfront much photographed as an iconic view of Vrindavan.



Fig. 3: Location of Keshi Ghat heritage precinct in Vrindavan's historic core

Source: Author

Ephemeral Landscapes

It is observed that myths are enacted by devotees through active engagement with the physical environment. This results in ‘making’ places, i.e. appropriating the existing built environment by leaving behavior traces and bodily imprints. Cultural practices such as *parikrama* (circumambulation), *darshan* (ritual sighting), *snana* (ritual dip in the holy waters), *samkirtan* (chanting and dancing) perform the devotional *bhavs* (feelings) elicited by the perceived presence of divinity in the material world. The devotional practices re-enact Krishna *lilas*, structuring a sacred landscape in perception, replenishing collective images embedded in storytelling, and re-affirming faith in the capacity of the material world to reveal divinity.

Place-making occurs in leaving bodily imprints and using props and furnishings to recreate the imagined landscape of Krishna *lila*. The built environment and the riverfront are transformed in the process, producing ephemeral landscapes, and adding to the permanent structures already in place. The temporal articulation and occupation of spaces within and around static monuments makes for an ever-shifting urban landscape. Temporal rhythms of devotional activities are based upon the notion of time as a loop; thus, material heritage, and the intangible values and beliefs it expresses, is preserved in acts of place-making.

The *parikrama* ritual enacts the belief that a sacred center is to be venerated in clockwise movement of the body on its feet or full-length prostrations around it. This happens at various scales, for example Vrindavan-Mathura *parikrama* is part of the larger 84 kos *parikrama* around Braj region (Haberman, 1994). Devotees circumambulate centers—trees, Nidhi Van, *samadhis* and shrines, and temples—in Keshi ghat precinct, individually or as part of the Vrindavan *parikrama* circuit. In physically engaging with trees, water and the built environment, they leave bodily imprints and other behavior traces as markings of their temporary appropriation of places. Courtyards, clearings in groves, streets and street intersections, are spaces for pause. Building elements such as floors, plinths, steps, walls, and columns act as props in the spontaneous and organized ritual events, activating the built environment of *haveli* temples, *kunj*s and *kunj galis*, riverside *ghats* and groves.



Fig. 4: Place-making at Nidhi Van

Source: Author

Nidhi Van (forest of treasures) is the nocturnal retreat of Krishna and Radha where *maharaas* occurs in Raasmandal, where jealous Radha stole the flute from Krishna and played it at Bansi Chor Sthal, Krishna dug a *kund* (tank) to satisfy the thirst of the *gopi* Vishakha, and Radha and Krishna spent nights together at Rang Mahal. Circumambulation in Nidhi Van is clockwise movement through the grove of evergreen *pilu* (*salvadora persica*) trees around 2-2.5 meters high, planted in pairs with their low intertwined branches, and *tulasi* (holy basil--*ocimum tenuiflorum*) shrubs. The somatic experiences in circumambulating include haptic and kinesthetic experiences of climbing up steps of the ornate gateway and walking barefoot on the stone pathway under tree canopies filtering sunlight and casting dappled shadows, tactile experiences in touching the footprints left by Banke Bihari (another name of Krishna), hugging trees and tying threads on their branches to ask for blessings or to make a wish, participating in *aarti* (waving of lamps) and ingesting *prasad* (food offerings to the deity and shared with devotees as grace) at Rang Mahal, dancing on the *mandala* shaped floor of the Raasmandal, and singing songs composed by saint Haridas at his *samadhi* (memorial structure). These ritual enactments of Krishna legends at specific states induce intense emotional fervor and enable the devotee to relive the myths. Place-making as it occurred in the past is extended in the present as seen in makeshift installations of stones near Haridas Samadhi, as commemorative markers of devotees' visit.

Circumambulations around *gheras* includes pausing to visit temples to obtain *darshan* of deities and participating in community rituals and festivals. At Radharaman temple for example devotees come to do *darshan* and participate in the eight-fold round of rituals (*ashtayama lila*) performed daily by the priests to wake up, bathe, feed and put to bed the living deity. They follow the Vaishnava temple rituals codified in the Sanskrit text *Hari Bhakti Vilasa* (Packert, 2010). Devotees sit on plinths extending from houses in the *ghera* along the street and at the temple entry (*gokhe*) for the temple doors to open in the mornings and evenings; when circumambulating the temple sanctum, they seek physical contact with the divine, some making *swastikas* (mystical diagram) with fresh cowdung on the exterior walls of the temple.



Fig. 5: Devotees waiting for the temple to open

Source: Author

The temple interior with its central courtyard surrounded by *tibaris* (hall with three arched openings) on three sides and *jagmohan* (intermediate space between the sanctum and courtyard) on the fourth, becomes a theater of participatory engagement during daily rituals and seasonal festivals. Musicians and singers sit on the sangeet *tibari* facing the *jagmohan*, *bhagwat katha* (stories from *Bhagwat Purana*) are recited and festive materials are kept on *tibaris* on either side of the *jagmohan*; devotees too sit in *tibaris*. The plinth of the *jagmohan* is used by priests, who are intermediaries between the deity and devotees, to hand out food, flowers, *tulasi* garlands, and other forms of sacra. During Holi festival in *phalgun* (spring), Radharaman deity comes out of the

sanctum into the *jagmohan* to celebrate with his devotees; during Govardhan puja after the Diwali festival, Krishna is worshipped as the Govardhan Parvat (hill) made of cow dung in the courtyard, and in this way Govardhan Hill lifted by Krishna to protect his community from incessant rains and synonymous with him is symbolically represented within the Radharaman Temple. The temple is transformed during festivals with columns covered with bright fabrics and flower garlands, and colorful fabric bands over the open courtyard. *Phool banglas* (flower pavilions) recreating the *kunj* in changing seasons, add an ephemeral decorative layer to the ornamental stone carvings of flowers and leaves on the temple interior.

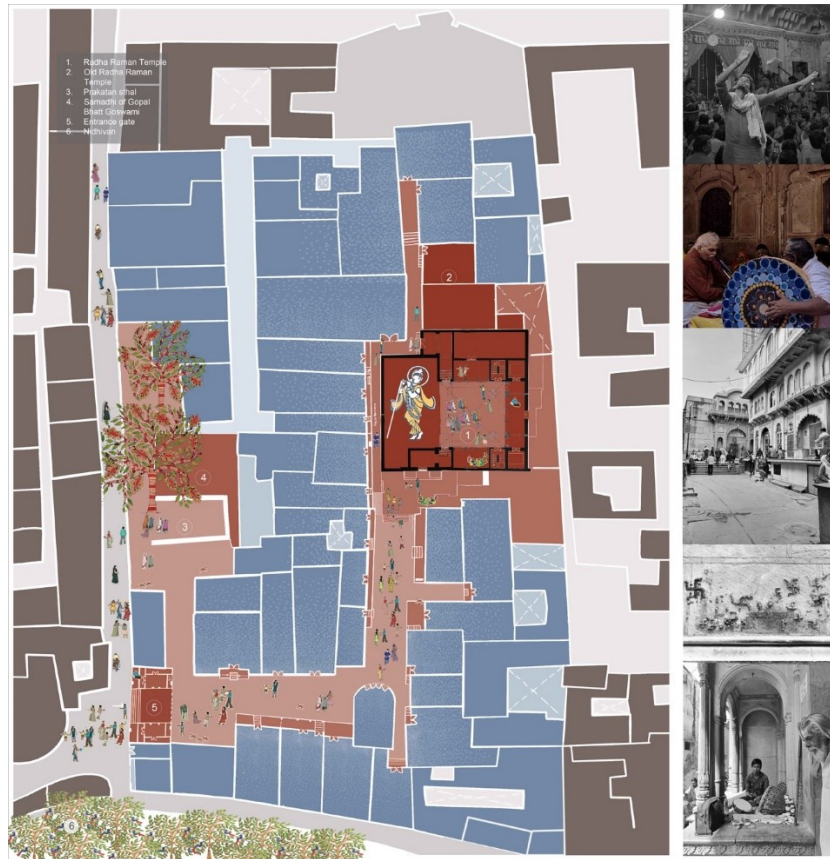


Fig. 6: Place-making at Radharaman Ghera

Source: Author

Keshi Ghat where the Yamuna takes a turn southwards encircling Vrindavan, commemorates Krishna's killing of ass/horse demon with long hair (*kesh* means hair in Sanskrit) sent by his evil uncle Kans. When Keshi charged, Krishna thrust his arm into its mouth and choked it to death and so Krishna came to be known as Keshav and the spot where he bathed after killing the demon as Keshi Ghat. Keshi Ghat is part of the *parikrama* path around Vrindavan, and as devotees do their clockwise circumambulation, they pause on the *ghats* and take one of the many streets converging on this stretch to visit temples a short distance from the riverfront, and then return back to the main path; thus, smaller *parikrama* loops are embedded with the longer circumambulatory route. The *ghats* are pauses on the *parikrama* and support activities whose daily rhythm is tied to the Yamuna and its seasonal flow. Yamuna is considered to be the beloved of Krishna and is worshipped both in her iconic form at a riverside temple and in her phenomenal form (Sinha and Ruggles, 2004). In the many devotional rituals focusing on the holy river and in *parikrama* ritual, visual, tactile, haptic and kinesthetic sensations are part of the over-all somatic experience. The steps lead into the river water for bathing at dawn and during festivals especially during *Kartik Maas* in autumn considered auspicious for women to bathe in Yamuna as it is

associated with Krishna's beloved, Radha. In the evening *aarti* to Yamuna and regular *puja* (worship), steps, *tibaris*, and *burjes* of the *ghats* are activated as spaces for preparing, viewing, and participating in ceremonies. The shifting silt beds formed by the receding flow of Yamuna in the dry season are used for worship rituals and are cluttered with offerings.¹ During the Chunri Manorath festival, Yamuna as a goddess is draped with colorful clothing (*chunri*) by stretching a long roll of fabric using many boats. The *tibaris* of riverside *kunj*s become part of the movement corridor of pilgrims and their niches occupied by flower and incense sellers, horoscope readers, and other peripatetic vendors who cater to the ritual needs of devotees.

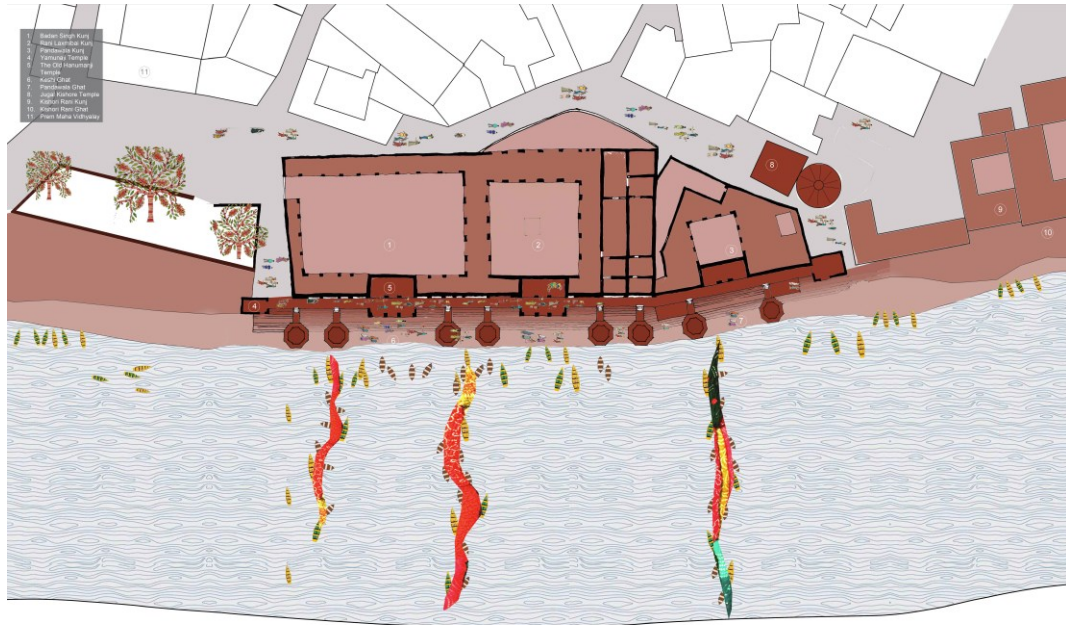


Fig. 7: Keshi Ghat Riverfront buildings and *ghats*

Source: Author



Fig. 8: Place-making at Keshi Ghat

Source: Author

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the arcadia-like landscape imagined in a rich corpus of stories and depicted in visual arts is recreated in temples through place-making by devotees. ‘Living’ or intangible heritage, that which is alive in memories, and re-enacted in rituals and performance, is thus embodied in place-making.

This paper thus concludes that the arcadia-like landscape imagined in a rich corpus of stories and depicted in visual arts is central to the intangible heritage of Vrindavan; it is recreated through props, furnishings, and bodily imprints in living temples where Krishna is worshipped. This contrasts with few or no devotional activities in state preserved temples preserved as relics from the past and disconnected from the life around them. The historic temples discourage bodily engagement with the built structures, only permitting distant viewing. The sacred, however, is re-emerging through re-installation of deities in monuments, thus revealing the power of place narratives. A rethinking of the current conservation practices is required to accommodate place-making activities for preserving living heritage.

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Notes

ⁱ See Hawley (2020) for the timeline of Uttar Pradesh Government's bumbling attempts to address pollution in the Yamuna and develop the Riverfront. Yamuna's flow has reduced considerably because of barrages and diversion of river water to irrigation canals upstream. The drastic change in its course in the last couple of centuries has resulted in the historic ghats (with the exception of Keshi Ghat) no longer touching water. The Riverfront falls within the regulated zone of 300 meters of ASI protected monuments—Madan Mohan and Jugal Kishor Temple. Allahabad High Court issued an order in 2017 to stop any building construction that violated environmental regulations governing the riverbed.