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Article

Pathways of Devotion and Domination: Consumption, Caste and the Production of Space at Govardhan

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Abstract:

This paper examines the socio-spatial transformations of Govardhan Mountain, a pilgrimage site in Uttar Pradesh, India. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, combining participant observation, informal interviews, and spatial mapping, it argues that the once-egalitarian ritual of parikrama (circumambulation) has been reconfigured through the rising service economy, caste-based religious brokerage, and consumerist pressures. Employing Lefebvre's production of space, Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic capital and habitus, and insights from critical caste studies, the study shows how upper-caste networks dominate temple bidding, direct tourist flows, and commodify ritual goods. Simultaneously, marginalised castes are relegated to precarious e-rickshaw labour and informal markets, where they deploy everyday tactics of alliance and ritual reinterpretation to carve out visibility and dignity. The paper also highlights the ecological toll of adulterated ritual products (synthetic milk) and mismanaged communal resources, revealing a disconnect between various forms of the political economy of space. Policy interventions like plastic bans, cleaning contracts, and mobility regulations often fail due to corruption and a lack of grounding in local life-worlds. By centering both the structural reproduction of caste hierarchies and the tactical agency of marginalised actors, this study argues that space is neither static nor purely spiritual but a contested arena of power, capital, and everyday negotiation.

Keywords: Govardhan, Caste and Consumption, Pilgrimage and Tourism, Production of Space, Ritual Economy, Planning and Design

1. INTRODUCTION

Nestled in the Braj region of Uttar Pradesh, the Govardhan mountain is a site of profound religious significance for devotees of Lord Krishna. Pilgrims from across India and abroad come here to perform the parikrama, a circumambulation of the sacred hill, believed to bring spiritual merit and divine blessings (Bharadwaj, 1973). Circumambulation (parikrama) (Jacobsen, 2013) denotes a spiritual aspect and is used for pilgrims only, but walking as a means of tourism has been theoretically debated and preferred for its sustainability and health benefits (Hall et al., 2017; Southworth, 2005, 2013). Govardhan has been visited by pilgrims and tourists alike, and they both form important social types of travellers. Citing Skandapurana, Bhardwaj (Bhardwaj, 1973) contends that pilgrimage in Hinduism means austerity, hardships, sacrifices, and pains. For this, physical, mental, and moral discipline is required. As per Smith (1992), the spectrum of travelers (tourist and pilgrim as social types) encompassing these two ends has their contrasting dimensions of secular and sacred. But in this "the shifting world of post-modern travel" (Badone and Roseman, 2004), these two cannot be kept as ideal types or opposite poles. Long viewed as an egalitarian spiritual practice by the locals, walking the 21-kilometre route around Govardhan has historically served as a ritual of humility and devotion, open to all regardless of caste, class, or gender. Yet, in recent years, this sacred geography has undergone profound transformations that call for critical sociological scrutiny.

As Govardhan becomes increasingly embedded within a service- and consumption-driven economy, older structures of caste and landownership are not simply

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eroding; they are being reconfigured and reinforced in new forms. There has been a growth of religious tourism, especially in northern India (Singh, 2021). This has led to the proliferation of small businesses, e-rickshaw services, and ritual economies around temples, creating new forms of labour, visibility, and exclusion. While upper-caste groups, primarily Thakurs, Brahmins, and Baniyas, still retain control over land, temples, and market spaces, members of marginalised castes, especially the Jatavs, are largely relegated to the periphery of this emerging economy. Their participation is often confined to precarious and low-income services such as e-rickshaw driving, and their attempts at entering consumer markets are frequently thwarted through informal but persistent caste-based practices.

This paper critically examines how space is being produced and contested at Govardhan through the interplay of devotion, caste, consumption, and governance. Drawing on fieldwork and grounded observations, I explore how the spiritual act of walking, once a potential equaliser, is being re-signified amid consumerist tendencies and infrastructural shifts. The introduction of e-rickshaws, the bidding processes for temple control, the selective direction of tourists by Brahmin priests, and the circulation of adulterated ritual goods are not isolated developments but symptoms of a deeper socio-spatial restructuring, one in which caste power is subtly but actively reasserted.

At the same time, this paper resists romanticising the past or flattening the present. It does not argue for a return to a "pure" ritual space untouched by modernity, nor does it wholly critique the rise of a tourist economy. Rather, it attends to the messy, negotiated, and often contradictory realities on the ground. While structural inequalities persist, marginal actors deploy everyday tactics of resistance and survival, from forming informal alliances to directing tourists through placards and peer networks.

Theoretically, the paper is informed by Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), alongside Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and critical caste theory (Ambedkar, 1968; Guru, 2017; Teltumbde, 2018; Yengde, 2019). Through this lens, I ask:

- How is the space of Govardhan being socially and economically restructured?
- How do devotional practices like walking interact with or resist emerging hierarchies?
- In what ways do consumerist logics shape the sacred?
- What forms of everyday resistance emerge among marginalised caste actors?

In engaging with these questions, this paper seeks to contribute to broader debates in the sociology of religion, space and caste, and the political economy of pilgrimage. Govardhan, as this paper will show, is not just a site of spiritual aspiration; rather, it is also a contested terrain where power, purity, and profit coalesce.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon a constellation of theoretical frameworks that together illuminate the layered production of space at Govardhan. At the core is the work of Henri Lefebvre, whose seminal formulation of the *production of space* (Lefebvre, 1991) offers a foundational lens through which to understand how sacred geographies like Govardhan are not merely natural or religious backdrops but socially produced, contested, and stratified terrains. Lefebvre's spatial triad "spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces" proves especially useful for examining how ritual actions, commercial activities, and symbolic meanings converge and conflict in the transformation of Govardhan from a site of pilgrimage to a dense religious economy.

- Spatial practices, such as the parikrama or the driving of e-rickshaws, encode and reproduce social relations in movement. The shift from walking to mechanised transport, for instance, is not a neutral technological adoption but a symbolic realignment of access, piety, and prestige, often mediated by caste.
- Representations of space, including maps, policies, temple authorities' management strategies, and even tourist itineraries, reflect the conceived space, the one dominated by the interests of those who plan, regulate, and profit from the terrain, typically upper-caste elites.
- Representational spaces, or the lived experience of Govardhan by pilgrims and locals, often resist or reframe official narratives. The everyday tactics of lower-caste vendors, placard use, and peer networks among e-rickshaw drivers inhabit this space of negotiation and resilience.

To sharpen this analysis of social differentiation within space, the paper also engages Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). The dominance of Brahmins, Baniyas, and Thakurs in the service and temple economies is not simply a matter of access to material resources but a reflection of their symbolic capital, their ability to be seen as legitimate bearers of tradition, trust, and authority. This symbolic capital is enacted and reinforced through micro-interactions, such as pilgrims being directed toward "purer" shops based on caste. Bourdieu's theory helps explain how such spatial dynamics appear "natural" or "spiritually correct" when they are, in fact, deeply political.

The reconfiguration of caste power at Govardhan also requires a grounding in critical caste studies. Drawing on the work of scholars like Anand Teltumbde, Suraj Yengde, and Gopal Guru, this paper situates caste not as a relic of the past but as a modern, adaptive, and continuously turned force (Ambedkar, 1968; Guru, 2017; Teltumbde, 2018; Yengde, 2019). These scholars underscore how caste is not only preserved through endogamy or ritual exclusion but also through economic arrangements, spatial configurations, and everyday discourse. At Govardhan, caste is reasserted through spatial privilege: who owns the shops, who gets visibility in the temple economy, and who

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navigates the market through whispers of "punya", all of which are sustained through modern institutions, not merely traditional norms.

Finally, the paper engages with literature on consumer culture and neoliberal sacred economies. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Zygmunt Bauman (1998) highlight how globalisation and consumerism reshape religious sites into spectacles of consumption, where spiritual experiences are often mediated by purchase, branding, and commodification. At Govardhan, this is visible in the adulteration of ritual goods, the outsourcing of pond cleaning from community rituals to mismanaged bureaucracy, and the rise of a "devotional marketplace" where sacred merit is intertwined with consumer choice. The sacred, here, is no longer outside of capital; it is produced through it.

In synthesising these frameworks, this paper argues that the transformation of Govardhan is not simply a rural shift to a tourist economy or a secular incursion into the sacred but a rearticulation of power, purity, and place. Space at Govardhan is made not only by the feet that walk it but also by the capital that flows through it, the symbols that sanctify it, and the caste formations that organise it.

3. FIELD SITE AND METHODOLOGY

This study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted at Govardhan, a sacred hill and pilgrimage site located in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh, India. Known primarily for the ritual of *parikrama,* a circumambulation route of approximately 21 kilometres. Govardhan draws thousands of pilgrims daily (Uttar Pradesh Braj Teerth Vikas Parishad, n.d.), With numbers peaking during religious festivals like Govardhan Puja, Guru Purnima, Teej, and Ekadashi. The site is not only a devotional destination but also a dense socio-economic environment where religious meaning, caste hierarchies, and consumer practices intersect.

3.1. Methodological Approach

Fieldwork was conducted over multiple visits spanning different seasons to capture variations in religious activity, tourist influx, and local economic rhythms. The methodology is rooted in participant observation, informal interviews, and site documentation, allowing for an immersive understanding of the socio-spatial dynamics at play (Harper, 2014).

I engaged with a diverse range of actors, including:

1. Local shopkeepers from varying caste backgrounds
2. E-rickshaw drivers, particularly from Dalit (Jatav) communities
3. Pilgrims and visitors, both individual and group travellers
4. Temple functionaries and priests (pandits)
5. Administrative officials at the local level

Conversations were often informal, conducted in Hindi, and sometimes laced with Bundeli or Braj dialects, which were translated and interpreted within their social and affective contexts. Emphasis was placed not only on what was said but also on the spatial practices and gestures, such as where people stood, how they moved, who was deferred to, and who was ignored. These embodied cues provided crucial insight into everyday caste politics and ritual economies.

3.2. Positionality and Reflexivity

As a researcher embedded within the broader Indian social milieu but not a local to Govardhan, I occupy a liminal position, simultaneously insider and outsider. A friend of mine, who identifies as a lower caste, lives near the Govardhan circumambulation route and helped me in getting access to the field and building rapport with the participants. My own privileged positions of caste and class were acknowledged throughout the fieldwork. The Braj dialect was relatively easy to familiarise with, as my own family had migrated to Delhi from Uttar Pradesh about 30 years ago. This position provided certain affordances, such as familiarity with caste structures and religious narratives, while also necessitating attentiveness to the subtleties of local alliances, silences, and coded speech. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the fieldwork process, particularly in how people responded differently based on my perceived class-caste identity, educational background, and mode of interaction.

3.3. The Site as Lived Space

Govardhan is not a singular or static entity; it is a shifting assemblage (Tuan, 1977) of sacred geography, commercial zones, religious institutions, and labour circuits. Its physical terrain includes the hill itself, multiple temples and shrines, a main bazaar area dominated by upper-caste-owned shops, adjoining villages inhabited by both dominant and marginalised caste groups, and key ecological features such as ritual ponds (*kunds*) and forests (*vanas*). These landscapes are symbolically dense yet increasingly inscribed with infrastructural developments such as concrete roads, CCTV cameras, signage, and government interventions aimed at "beautification" or "pilgrim facilitation".

This methodological and spatial grounding enables an analysis that is attentive not only to ritual meaning or economic change but also to the complex ways in which sacred space (Timothy & Olsen, 2006) is inhabited, claimed, and contested by those who live and labour around it.

4. WALKING, CASTE, AND THE POLITICS OF MOBILITY

The parikrama around Govardhan has historically been considered a deeply egalitarian act of spiritual devotion. Performed barefoot by pilgrims across caste and class backgrounds, the ritual of circumambulating the sacred hill enacts a theological equality: all are walkers before the divine. In local discourse, walking symbolises humility (*vinamrata*), penance (*tapasya*), and a direct, bodily form of surrender. However, field observations reveal that this embodied ritual is now increasingly being mediated by mechanisms of capital and caste, as the act of walking is replaced or supplemented by e-rickshaw rides, a form of

mechanised circumambulation that introduces new layers of stratification into the sacred journey.

The introduction of e-rickshaws was initially framed by the administration as a way to facilitate access for elderly pilgrims, women, and the physically infirm. Yet, in practice, it has led to the symbolic and material reconfiguration of mobility. E-rickshaws are now used not only by those who require assistance but also by middle-class and upper-caste tourists who prefer a quicker, less taxing experience of the parikrama. Walking, once a shared act of devotion, is now increasingly marked by socio-economic status; to walk is often associated with labour and lack, while to ride is increasingly coded as convenient, respectable, and modern (Miller, 2008).

This transformation has implications for caste visibility and labour. The majority of e-rickshaw drivers belong to marginalised castes, especially Jatavs, who have been structurally excluded from the more profitable sectors of the service economy. Their entry into the religious economy occurs not through ownership of space (like shops or temples) but through embodied labour, driving for long hours with limited earnings, vulnerable to both economic exploitation and administrative harassment. The government's policy technically restricts the number of e-rickshaws allowed on the parikrama route, but corruption and local administrative complicity mean that more vehicles than permitted are often in operation. When enforcement occurs, it is selective and punitive, disproportionately affecting lower-caste drivers whose vehicles are impounded or fined, while those backed by upper-caste networks continue to ply without obstruction.

Moreover, the shift to vehicular movement has led to subtle forms of ritual re-signification. While walking the entire route was once considered the most spiritually meritorious, today, devotional value is often rearticulated through caste discourse and consumption narratives. For example, it is not uncommon to hear phrases like *"Those e-rickshaws are driven by low castes—real punya comes from riding with a Brahmin or from the rickshaw wala connected to the temple."* Such utterances reveal how ritual worth is being recoded through caste markers, with symbolic capital now attached to who drives, who guides, and who benefits economically.

While walking was never free of caste (Dalits often reported being ignored or disrespected by temple staff even when walking was briefly paused to rest at temples), it had a levelling force by virtue of being a shared practice across social strata. The emergence of consumerised mobility has introduced a new spatial grammar of caste, one in which movement is mediated not just by devotion but by economic privilege and symbolic positioning. In this sense, the road around Govardhan becomes a mobile caste economy, where everyday decisions such as who walks, who rides, and who drives are saturated with political meaning.

Yet, lower-caste actors do not participate passively in this transformation. Some drivers form informal alliances, directing pilgrims without guides to shops owned by known allies from their own caste. These micro-resistances, while often limited in reach, represent tactical subversions within a system that otherwise obscures and erases their presence. As will be explored in the following sections, similar strategies emerge in other spaces of the service economy, from temple bidding to shop placement, but here, on the circular road around the mountain, these dynamics are perhaps most literally and symbolically in motion.

5. THE TEMPLE ECONOMY: CASTE, CAPITAL, AND SYMBOLIC AUTHORITY

If the parikrama route is the circulatory system of Govardhan's devotional life, the temples function as its vital organs, as sites where religious meaning is produced, consumed, and circulated. Yet temples are not simply places of worship; they are also economic institutions, enmeshed in a complex matrix of caste hierarchies, competitive bidding, and symbolic capital. The temple economy in Govardhan is a revealing site through which to examine how ritual authority and economic control remain disproportionately concentrated in the hands of upper-caste groups, particularly Brahmins, Baniyas, and Thakurs.

In practice, the administration of temples, especially the shrines along the parikrama route, is governed not by fixed tenure but through yearly bidding systems. These are ostensibly open to all but in reality function as gatekeeping mechanisms. Bids are usually secured by those with existing networks of economic capital and caste legitimacy, effectively shutting out lower-caste individuals even before the process begins. The Brahmin-Baniya-Thakur nexus dominates this terrain through a system of mutual reinforcement: Baniyas may provide the capital for bids, Thakurs the social clout, and Brahmins the ritual legitimacy. The outcome is a self-reproducing elite structure, masked by the administrative formality of "open" bidding.

This caste-capital symbiosis extends into everyday temple operations. Pandits, almost exclusively from Brahmin backgrounds, do not merely perform rituals—they function as religious brokers, directing pilgrims toward "authentic" shops, guides, and accommodations. These recommendations are rarely neutral. Pilgrims, often unfamiliar with the local terrain and guided by the desire for spiritual merit (*punya*), tend to follow such suggestions unquestioningly. As one informant put it, *"If the pandit says, 'Go to that shop, we go. We want our offerings to be accepted by God."* The spiritual trust placed in Brahmin priests thus becomes a channel for economic traffic, reinforcing caste-based monopolies on the tourist economy.

Lower-caste actors, particularly Jatavs, are structurally excluded from this network. Even when they are able to establish shops, often on the outskirts or in less trafficked lanes, their businesses are frequently undermined through informal caste-based tactics. Visitors are warned away through whispered injunctions like, *"That shop is of a lower caste. Buy from the Brahmin's shop; your offering will carry more punya."* These are not isolated remarks but part

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of a discursive strategy of ritual pollution and symbolic exclusion, reinforced through social norms rather than overt policies.

Importantly, the ritual legitimacy of Brahminhood is not merely inherited; it is actively performed and reproduced. This occurs through gestures of sanctity (attire, language, ritual control) but also through economic transactions disguised as religious merit. Donations, for instance, are not just offerings to God but payments into a caste economy, where the spiritual "returns" are believed to be higher when mediated by upper-caste intermediaries. This conflation of religious trust with caste capital is what sustains the upper-caste stronghold in the temple economy even as the broader service sector diversifies.

There are moments of resistance. Lower-caste individuals have formed informal associations to contest unfair bidding practices, and some have begun using placards and signage to direct tourists to their shops or services, advertising "pure and unadulterated" products to counteract both literal and symbolic pollution narratives. However, these interventions often struggle against the authority of the temple priesthood, which serves as the primary interface between pilgrims and the local economy.

What emerges in Govardhan, then, is not merely a caste division of labour but a caste division of legitimacy; one that is spiritual, spatial, and symbolic. In the temple economy, ritual power is capital, and that capital is unevenly distributed through caste-coded networks that shape who gets seen, who gets trusted, and who gets paid (Stausberg, 2011).

6. RITUAL CONSUMPTION, ADULTERATION, AND ECOLOGICAL STRAIN

As Govardhan becomes increasingly entangled in circuits of devotional tourism, the sacred is not simply worshipped; it is consumed. Pilgrimage here is inseparable from ritualised acts of purchase: buying milk for abhishek, sweets as prasad, garlands, water bottles, and souvenirs. These consumables carry not just market value but symbolic weight, serving as vehicles for expressing devotion and accruing *punya*. However, field observations and testimonies suggest that this ritual economy has become deeply compromised by commodification, leading to widespread adulteration of products, degradation of the local ecology, and a profound disconnect between ritual form and ethical substance.

A particularly telling example lies in the adulteration of milk, a central ritual substance in Govardhan's devotional economy. Traditionally offered to the mountain stones (*Giriraj*), milk symbolises purity, abundance, and surrender. Yet much of what is sold today as "milk" is a synthetic concoction, typically a mixture of arrowroot powder, whitening agents, water, and, in some cases, industrial chemicals (one of the shopkeepers said, "anyways it's not going in someone's tummy, so why waste pure milk?"). Local vendors and even some priests are aware of this, but adulteration persists due to profit incentives, lack of regulation, and tourist ignorance. The symbolic purity of the act remains intact in the minds of many pilgrims, even as its material purity is degraded.

This disconnect points to a broader phenomenon: the fetishisation of the ritual over the material, where what matters is the act of consumption, not the conditions under which goods are produced or sourced. This is not simply a moral critique; it has real ecological and social consequences. Adulterated milk not only undermines the ethical integrity of worship but also contributes to public health risks and the erosion of trust within local economies.

The strain extends to ecological resources, particularly the ponds (*kunds*) and green zones that once formed part of the sacred geography of Govardhan. These water bodies were historically maintained by local communities as part of ritual obligations tied to festivals and seasons. Today, with a large portion of the population, especially from marginalised castes, absorbed into the service economy and with growing tourist footfall, these community-maintained systems have been replaced by administrative outsourcing. Garbage management, water cleaning, and pond preservation are now nominally the responsibility of municipal bodies, yet in practice, this results in sporadic interventions, rampant accumulation of plastic waste, and stagnant water filled with refuse.

Plastic bottles, leftover prasad wrappings, and temple waste accumulate not only around the ponds but also along the parikrama route, often remaining uncollected for days. This degradation is rarely seen as incompatible with the sacred status of the site, a testament to the success of commodified religiosity in masking its own material impacts. When questioned, some pilgrims remarked, *"What matters is devotion; these things are small."* Such responses reflect a ritual consumer mindset, where spiritual returns are imagined as unaffected by ecological neglect, especially when that neglect is visually or symbolically displaced onto "the administration" or "the locals".

At the policy level, attempts have been made to regulate plastic use, improve garbage collection, and promote sustainable tourism. However, these policies are often poorly implemented, inconsistently enforced, and inattentive to the lived realities of locals, especially those from marginalised backgrounds. For example, plastic bans are announced but rarely monitored, and cleaning contracts are awarded with little oversight. When environmental degradation becomes visible enough to spark public outrage, blame is unevenly distributed, with lower-caste workers or e-rickshaw drivers often scapegoated as contributors to the "mess", rather than as those structurally left to manage its fallout.

In this context, ritual consumption becomes a political act, not only in terms of caste and capital but in its environmental footprint. What is being consumed is not only milk, garlands, and holy objects, but the very ecological viability of a sacred space, with consequences borne most immediately by those who live, work, and depend on Govardhan daily.

7. TACTICS OF PRESENCE: RESISTANCE, ALLIANCES, AND EVERYDAY NEGOTIATIONS

Amid the structural entrenchment of caste hierarchies and the increasing commodification of sacred space in Govardhan, it would be a mistake to read lower-caste actors, particularly Jatavs and other Dalit groups, as merely passive or dispossessed. While formal channels of participation in the temple economy or market space are tightly controlled by upper-caste networks, the field reveals a persistent layer of tactical resistance and everyday subversion. These are not large-scale mobilisations, but rather incremental, improvised, and relational strategies – what Michel de Certeau might call "tactics" rather than "strategies" – that attempt to carve out space, visibility, and voice within an uneven terrain (de Certeau, 1984).

7.1. Informal Alliances and Referral Economies

One of the most prevalent forms of negotiation observed was the informal alliance networks among lower-caste workers, particularly e-rickshaw drivers and small-scale shopkeepers. These networks operate through a referral economy: drivers direct pilgrims to known vendors from their own community, shopkeepers encourage repeat customers to spread word-of-mouth, and mobile vendors (often children or elderly) circulate products while subtly signalling caste affiliation as a marker of authenticity and "purity". These tactics aim to bypass the upper-caste mediation that dominates temple-based referrals and monopolised shopfronts. Yet these referral networks are fragile. They depend on personal trust, shared identity, and local knowledge and are easily disrupted by large-scale events, shifts in administrative policy, or harassment by dominant-caste competitors. Moreover, while some pilgrims, especially those from urban Dalit backgrounds, recognise and intentionally support these actors, the majority continue to rely on the Brahmin-mediated circuits of trust and access.

7.2. Symbolic Counter-Claims and Visibility Politics

Other forms of resistance take the shape of symbolic counterclaims. In recent years, some Jatav shopkeepers have begun placing signage outside their establishments emphasising values like honesty, cleanliness, and "unadulterated" offerings. These placards function not only as advertising but as subtle counters to casteist narratives that frame their goods as impure or inauthentic. While these signs do not explicitly invoke caste, their placement and language are legible to those who understand the local context. They act as quiet assertions of ethical superiority, turning the rhetoric of purity, so often used against them, into a claim of moral legitimacy. Still, these signs often struggle for attention amid the visual dominance of upper-caste-owned shops with larger boards, better locations, and endorsements from temple priests. Visibility, in this context, is not merely a function of space but of symbolic capital, and lower-caste actors must constantly innovate to remain legible and relevant.

7.3. Strategic Compliance and Negotiated Risk

Resistance also appears in the form of strategic compliance, a kind of calculated obedience designed to reduce risk. For instance, when lower-caste e-rickshaw drivers are asked to vacate unauthorised spots or pay bribes during enforcement drives, many comply not out of acceptance but from a pragmatic reading of their structural vulnerability. At the same time, they often negotiate informally with sympathetic officials or local power-brokers to regain access. These negotiations, though unequal, are forms of agency embedded within constraint, reflecting a politics of survival that is deeply spatial and relational.

7.4. Ritual Participation and Reinterpretation

Finally, there are emerging instances where ritual forms themselves are reinterpreted by marginalised groups. Some lower-caste families conduct their own versions of parikrama at night, away from crowds and temple gaze, emphasising personal connection over priestly mediation. Others engage in group worship or mobile singing practices (*bhajan mandalis*) that reclaim the performative dimensions of devotion without reliance on upper-caste ritual structures. These may seem peripheral, but they constitute a parallel religious ecology, one grounded in collective memory, affective labour, and quiet defiance. These practices, while often limited in reach and resources, matter profoundly. They illustrate how sacred space is not just imposed from above but also inhabited, contested, and reimagined from below. Govardhan, in this sense, is not a finished product of caste or capital; it is a living site of negotiation, where devotional labour, economic survival, and political identity are continuously entangled.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how Govardhan, a site of intense spiritual devotion and mythological significance, has become a terrain where sacred space is continuously produced, contested, and stratified. What may seem at first glance to be a devotional pilgrimage is, upon closer inspection, a dense and evolving socio-economic ecology, shaped by caste hierarchies, consumer practices, ecological shifts, and uneven access to spiritual capital (Eck, 2003). We began by tracing how the ritual of walking, once understood as an equalising spiritual act, has been restructured by the entry of e-rickshaws and the broader commodification of mobility. This transformation has undermined the egalitarian symbolism of the parikrama, recoding it through class and caste distinctions. Walking now indexes marginality; riding, privilege. The shift is not merely practical; it is political, material, and symbolic.

In the temple economy, ritual legitimacy has merged with economic control, creating a triad of Brahmin, Baniya, and Thakur dominance. Bidding systems for temple rights, informal referral networks from pandits, and symbolic caste markers in consumption all reinforce a closed loop of authority, where access to pilgrims, visibility in the market, and participation in the ritual economy are reserved for a select few. At the same time, the commodification of ritual consumption, from adulterated milk offerings to mass-

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produced prasad, has further strained both the material ecology of Govardhan and the ethical substance of its spirituality. The ponds stagnate; plastic accumulates; the very landscape that devotees seek to honour is transformed into a backdrop for consumer devotion (Haberman, 2006). Administrative policies, though occasionally well-meaning, often fail in their implementation due to corruption, lack of capacity, and a disconnect from local everyday realities. And yet, this is not a story of total domination. Lower-caste actors, though structurally excluded, exercise tactical agency through informal alliance networks, symbolic self-assertion, and ritual reinterpretation. These practices may not overturn the dominant order, but they re-inscribe presence and claim belonging in a space that often seeks to erase or marginalise them (Casey, 1996; Harvey, 2008). Govardhan, therefore, must be understood not as a stable religious landscape but as a site of negotiation, where power is entrenched but never uncontested.

8.1. Policy and Scholarly Implications

From a policy perspective, any effort to reform or regulate the sacred economy of Govardhan must take seriously the lived realities and knowledge systems of its residents, especially those on the margins. Cleanliness drives, temple regulation, and mobility policies must move beyond top-down announcements and become embedded in everyday practices and solidarities. The collective historical methods of preserving the mountain ecology should be supplemented by technological interventions. The temple's governance should be more participatory by caste-sensitive allocation to bidders whilst using inclusive forms of leasing and partnerships, rather than leaving it to the whims of the neoliberal market forces.

Theoretically, this paper aims to contribute to conversations at the intersection of urban sociology, caste studies, religious economies, and political ecology. It foregrounds the idea that sacred space is not pre-given but produced through embodied practices, economic exchanges, and symbolic struggles, all of which are shaped by deeply historical and deeply contemporary caste logics (Dumont, 1980). Hence, by shifting the focus on caste and capital, this paper brings out the need for timely interventions, as the space is being constantly altered by various forces. In closing, to walk around Govardhan is not just to trace a spiritual path; it is to move through a dense landscape of caste, capital, and contestation, where every step, ride, or offering carries social meaning. Understanding these meanings and how they are made, unmade, and remade is essential to any critical engagement with the production of space in contemporary India.

These emerging organisations reflect both continuity and rupture with the older Bahujan political tradition. While they share a commitment to Ambedkarite principles – social justice, education, and dignity for the marginalised – they differ in their strategies, structures, and constituencies. Some prioritise social reform and mass mobilisation over electoral politics, while others aim to contest elections and build alternative political platforms. Chandrashekhar Azad's blend of activism, symbolic leadership, and grassroots education has gained significant attention, especially among Dalit youth. However, his Azad Samaj Party, despite winning a single seat in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, remains electorally limited. Hence, these post-Kanshiram organisations contributed to the diversion of Bahujan voters and created chaos and confusion among them. Since none of these parties could assure political representation of these groups, this confusion benefitted the dominant parties, such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

Single author article.

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Availability of Data and Materials

Sources are cited.

Competing Interests

Not Applicable

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval.

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