

Governing The Sacred: Religious Tourism, Informal Livelihoods, and Everyday Negotiations In Varanasi

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Abstract

Large-scale urban redevelopment in India's sacred cities like Ayodhya and Varanasi, driven by religious tourism and heritage planning, is often framed as revitalisation and economic opportunity. Yet these interventions have complex implications for informal religious economies. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, focusing on Varanasi following the development of the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, this paper examines how redevelopment reshapes sacred space through regulatory practices, surveillance, spatial reorganisation, and changing pedestrian flows. It shows that informal religious workers—priests, boatmen, vendors, artisans, and women engaged in ritual production—experience governance as a set of prolonged uncertainties, which they navigate through adaptive strategies, collaboration, and community-based practices. By foregrounding everyday negotiation and embedded livelihoods, the paper demonstrates that sacred cities function as socio-economic ecosystems in which informality is constitutive rather than residual. Sustainable religious tourism, it argues, requires governance frameworks attentive to livelihood embeddedness, ritual temporality, and social inclusion, rather than prioritising aesthetic order alone.

Keywords: sacred urbanism, informal religious economies, community-based tourism, governmentality, Varanasi

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Sacred cities in India have long functioned as dense socio-religious ecosystems in which ritual, economy, and urban space are deeply intertwined. In cities such as Varanasi, pilgrimage, artisanal production, service labour, and informal commerce sustain religious practices as much as temples and ritual specialists do. Recent redevelopment initiatives, particularly the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, have transformed the urban landscape, enhancing accessibility, visibility, and security, while simultaneously reshaping informal economies, spatial hierarchies, and the temporal rhythms of ritual.

Existing scholarship on religious tourism highlights its economic significance and the commodification of sacred spaces (Singh, 2004; Timothy & Olsen, 2006), while urban studies literature foregrounds the disciplining effects of planning regimes and state governance on informal actors (Roy, 2009). Yet less attention has been given to the lived experience of redevelopment: how informal workers interpret, negotiate, and adapt to regulatory ambiguity, spatial restructuring, and tourist expectations. This article addresses that gap by examining the daily realities of those whose livelihoods and ritual work are embedded in Varanasi's sacred spaces.

The **primary objective** of this study is to understand how religious tourism-driven urban redevelopment reshapes sacred space and informal livelihoods. A **secondary objective** is to examine how workers negotiate these transformations through everyday adaptations and informal collaborations, revealing opportunities for sustainable, community-oriented tourism practices.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Varanasi between December 2025 and January 2026 focusing on areas surrounding the Kashi Vishwanath Temple corridor, adjoining Ghats, and inner neighbourhoods affected by recent redevelopment initiatives. Research methods included non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with priests, boatmen, flower sellers, sari weavers, guides, and women engaged in home-based ritual production. Rather than treating redevelopment as a discrete policy intervention, the research approaches it as an ongoing process experienced through everyday practices, uncertainties, and adjustments—an orientation that directly informs the paper's discussion of governance, precarity, and adaptation.

Fieldwork was conducted through repeated visits and extended stays across different temporal contexts, including ordinary days, weekends, festival periods, and peak tourist seasons. This temporal variation was methodologically significant, as it revealed how regulations, surveillance, and economic opportunities fluctuate depending on crowd density and administrative priorities. Such variation underpins the paper's analysis of flexible and uneven governance in redeveloped sacred spaces.

Primary field sites included Ghats adjacent to the Kashi Vishwanath corridor, inner lanes connecting residential neighbourhoods to temple precincts, informal vending clusters, boat docking points, and home-based sites of ritual production. These locations were selected

to capture the differentiated spatial effects of redevelopment, a theme that recurs in the discussion of uneven vulnerability and opportunity within community-based tourism.

Observation formed the core of the research. Time was spent accompanying boatmen during working hours, observing vendors' interactions with pilgrims and tourists, attending rituals conducted by priests, and visiting households engaged in ritual production, particularly those involving women's labour. Observation extended beyond moments of economic exchange to include waiting, interruptions, informal negotiations with security personnel, and collective discussions among workers. These observations form the empirical basis for the fieldwork vignettes used in the discussion section to illustrate everyday navigation of regulation and surveillance.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 35 respondents, including boatmen, vendors, priests, women engaged in home-based ritual production, and local guides. Interviews focused on livelihood histories, perceptions of redevelopment, changes in footfall, experiences of regulation, and strategies of adaptation. Rather than eliciting fixed positions on redevelopment, interviews were designed to capture narratives of uncertainty and gradual adjustment, reflecting how change is experienced over time.

Many insights also emerged through informal conversations at tea stalls, Ghats, and shared resting spaces. These interactions often revealed concerns related to surveillance, fines, and moral scrutiny that respondents were reluctant to articulate in formal interviews. Such encounters are treated as ethnographic data, highlighting how information about rules and risks circulates informally within sacred economies.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded for recurring themes such as regulatory ambiguity, economic precarity, gendered labour, surveillance, ritual adaptation, and collaboration. Analytical concepts are woven into the empirical narrative rather than presented in a separate theoretical section, allowing theory to emerge from lived experience. This methodological grounding enables the paper's central argument: that community-based tourism in Varanasi is not a stable model or policy outcome but a fragile set of practices continually produced through everyday negotiation within redeveloped sacred spaces.

Varanasi's Sacred Space and Informal Livelihoods

Varanasi's sacred space is sustained not only by temples and rituals but by the daily labour of informal workers, whose activities form the lived infrastructure of the city. Flower sellers provide ritual offerings; boatmen ferry pilgrims along the Ganga; guides interpret sacred history; artisans produce temple cloths and ritual objects; women coordinate incense and thread-making at home. Each of these livelihoods is spatially and temporally embedded: access to ghats, proximity to temples, and timing of rituals are central to economic and religious continuity.

The Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project has improved access and created a direct, wide axis between the temple and river, facilitating tourist movement. Yet it has also introduced spatial marginalisation of informal actors, regulatory surveillance, and new moral and behavioural expectations. These shifts exemplify Foucault's (1991) notion of

governmentality, where power operates through everyday techniques, producing compliant subjects who internalise rules of visibility, order, and aesthetic normativity. Informal workers are not outright displaced but are forced to navigate a landscape of conditional legitimacy.

The notion of the sacred complex (Vidyarthi, 1961; Vidyarthi & Saraswati, 1979) helps situate these changes: sacred space is constituted not only by temples and rituals but by networks of labour, service, and social relationships. Tourism further complicates this process, as rituals and artisanal work become objects of visual consumption, reshaping cultural expression (Urry, 1990). Workers' strategies reflect a continuous negotiation between local knowledge, state regulation, and tourist expectations.

Fieldwork Encounters: Everyday Problems and Lived Navigations

Redevelopment is rarely experienced as a single event of displacement. Its effects unfold through a series of everyday problems that require continuous negotiation. Informal workers constantly adjust to regulatory ambiguity, economic precarity, and spatial restructuring, demonstrating the interplay between governance, ritual practice, and livelihood.

Negotiating Regulatory Ambiguity: Boatmen, vendors, and guides frequently reported confusion over shifting rules, including licensing, permissible routes, and access timings. Regulations were often communicated informally through peers or temple volunteers rather than official channels. Missing an update could mean losing an entire day's income: "*If today the boarding point is shifted and you don't know, you wait with the boat but no passenger comes,*" one boat operator explained. Most workers rely on cautious compliance combined with vigilant observation, reflecting the subtle exercise of agency within governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Social networks serve as critical information channels, allowing workers to interpret and anticipate changes.

Irregular Footfall and Economic Precarity: The corridor redirected pedestrian flows, reducing footfall in inner lanes where many vendors and artisans operate. Flower sellers, for example, reported longer working hours to compensate for fewer customers, while sari weavers near the ghats noted declines in visibility. Many diversified products—adding incense, packaged offerings, or small souvenirs—to stabilise income. These incremental adaptations illustrate resilience in the face of spatial and economic uncertainty (Roy, 2009).

Gendered Constraints: Women involved in home-based ritual production face additional barriers. Mobility restrictions, household responsibilities, and limited access to public spaces often require reliance on male intermediaries to sell products, reducing autonomy and profits. Fieldwork highlighted quiet strategies: coordinating bulk production, sharing raw materials, and rotating sales responsibilities within neighbourhood networks. These forms of collaboration, largely invisible in policy discourse, are essential for livelihood continuity (Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

Navigating Surveillance and Moral Scrutiny: Enhanced surveillance around the corridor—cameras, police presence, private security—introduces moral regulation. Vendors and artisans self-regulate to avoid fines or sanctions, minimising stall size, moderating behaviour, and aligning presentation with expectations of "respectability." This illustrates how governance shapes conduct beyond formal rules, creating subjects disciplined through visibility and social observation (Foucault, 1991).

Reworking Ritual Time: Priests and ritual specialists face pressures to align ceremonies with administrative schedules and crowd control. Rituals are often compressed, reordered, or abbreviated to accommodate peak tourist flows, demonstrating how redevelopment reshapes sacred temporality. While pragmatic, these adjustments raise questions about long-term effects on religious practice and continuity of the sacred complex (Vidyarthi, 1961).

Collaboration as Survival Strategy: Collaborative practices emerge as key adaptive strategies. Boatmen coordinate shifts and share profitable boarding points. Artisans partner with guides to bring tourists into workshops. Vendors pool resources to reduce individual risk. These micro-cooperative arrangements, though informal, are essential for sustaining livelihoods within redeveloped sacred spaces (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Such collaborations exemplify how workers negotiate power, regulation, and tourist expectations in daily practice.

Challenges and Opportunities: Community-Based Tourism in a Restructured Sacred City

The restructuring of Varanasi through large-scale redevelopment has produced a complex landscape in which community-based tourism (CBT) emerges not as a clearly articulated policy framework but as a set of fragmented, negotiated practices embedded in everyday survival. Fieldwork reveals that while redevelopment has created new opportunities for visibility, circulation, and tourism growth, it has simultaneously intensified precarity, regulatory control, and social differentiation. The possibilities of CBT therefore exist alongside—and are constrained by—structural challenges rooted in urban governance, spatial reordering, and unequal access to resources.

Regulatory Ambiguity and Informal Vulnerability

One of the most persistent challenges identified during fieldwork is regulatory ambiguity. Informal workers—boatmen, vendors, guides, and ritual service providers—operate within a constantly shifting regulatory environment marked by unclear rules, inconsistent enforcement, and informal communication. Licensing requirements, designated vending zones, docking points, and permissible timings are often altered without written notification, leaving workers dependent on word-of-mouth information circulated through peer networks or interactions with lower-level officials.

This uncertainty disproportionately affects those whose livelihoods depend on daily income. A missed update—such as a relocated boarding point or restricted access to a ghat—can result in the loss of an entire day's earnings. Rather than open resistance, workers adopt strategies of cautious compliance, constant monitoring, and selective risk-taking. While such navigation demonstrates adaptability, it also underscores the structural vulnerability of informal labour within redeveloped sacred spaces. In this context, CBT initiatives struggle to stabilise livelihoods because the regulatory environment remains unpredictable and unevenly applied.

Spatial Reordering and Uneven Economic Impact

Redevelopment has significantly altered pedestrian flows and spatial hierarchies within the city. The Kashi Vishwanath Corridor prioritises direct, linear movement between the temple and the Ganga, marginalising inner lanes and neighbourhoods that previously functioned as dense economic and ritual zones. Vendors and artisans located away from newly formalised routes experience a gradual erosion of footfall rather than immediate displacement.

Fieldwork indicates that this slow decline is particularly damaging because it is difficult to contest or compensate for. Workers respond by extending working hours, diversifying products, or reducing margins—strategies that increase labour intensity without guaranteeing stability. CBT initiatives such as heritage walks or workshop-based tourism offer partial relief by redirecting visitors into less visible spaces, but these remain limited in scale and depend heavily on personal networks with guides and intermediaries. As a result, opportunities generated by CBT tend to cluster among those already possessing social capital, spatial proximity, or narrative skills.

Gendered Constraints and Invisible Labour

Women's participation in community-based tourism reveals both significant possibilities and deep structural constraints. Official discourse frequently highlights women's self-help groups and home-based production as markers of inclusive development. However, fieldwork suggests that women's engagement with tourism remains mediated by domestic responsibilities, mobility restrictions, and reliance on male intermediaries for market access.

Women producing incense, ritual threads, and sacred textiles often lack direct contact with tourists, limiting their control over pricing and narratives. Earnings are frequently lower than those of male counterparts engaged in visible public labour. At the same time, women develop collective strategies—such as bulk production, shared procurement of raw materials, and rotational sales responsibilities—that enhance resilience. These practices constitute an important but largely invisible dimension of CBT, one that remains under-recognised in policy frameworks focused on formal entrepreneurship.

Surveillance, Aesthetics, and Moral Regulation

Redevelopment has intensified surveillance through cameras, police presence, and private security, particularly in and around the corridor. Informal workers describe a pervasive sense of being watched, leading to heightened anxiety and behavioural self-regulation. Vendors modify the size and appearance of stalls, avoid vocal sales tactics, and attempt to conform to an aesthetic of orderliness aligned with official visions of the sacred city.

This moral regulation disproportionately affects informal actors whose livelihoods rely on visibility and interaction. While surveillance is justified in the name of security and crowd management, it also produces exclusions by redefining what constitutes “appropriate” sacred labour. CBT initiatives must therefore navigate not only economic and spatial constraints but also normative expectations about behaviour, cleanliness, and respectability.

Ritual Adaptation and Temporal Compression

Redevelopment has also reshaped ritual time. Priests and ritual specialists face increasing pressure to compress ceremonies to accommodate crowd management protocols and tourist schedules. Funeral rites and extended rituals are particularly affected during peak hours, forcing families and priests to adjust practices that traditionally required temporal flexibility.

These adaptations are often framed as pragmatic solutions, but they raise concerns about the long-term transformation of religious practice. CBT initiatives that foreground ritual education and interpretation offer an opportunity to slow down tourist engagement and re-centre ritual meaning. However, such efforts remain marginal within a governance framework prioritising efficiency and throughput.

Opportunities: Community-Based Tourism as Urban Practice, Not Policy Add-On

Fieldwork in Varanasi indicates that the most significant opportunities associated with community-based tourism (CBT) do not emerge from formal programmes or state-led initiatives, but from everyday practices through which informal workers reorganise space, labour, and narrative within a redeveloped sacred city. These opportunities are neither uniform nor guaranteed; they are uneven, contingent, and often fragile. Yet they reveal how sacred economies continue to reproduce themselves under conditions of heightened regulation and spatial control.

Reclaiming Narrative Authority within the Tourist Gaze

One of the most important opportunities created through CBT lies in the reassertion of narrative authority by local actors. Redevelopment has intensified the dominance of a visual and monumental representation of Varanasi, privileging the corridor, the riverfront, and sanitised sacred imagery. In response, community-based initiatives redirect attention toward lived religious labour.

Boatmen, artisans, and priests increasingly position themselves as interpreters rather than service providers. Fieldwork encounters reveal guided boat rides that integrate mythology, labour history, and personal memory; weaving workshops where motifs are explained through ritual calendars; and informal temple guides who contextualise administrative changes through everyday experience. These practices transform tourism from passive consumption into situated learning, allowing communities to mediate the tourist gaze rather than merely perform for it. This narrative control enables workers to assert cultural authority while stabilising income through differentiation rather than volume.

Spatial Re-integration beyond the Corridor

While redevelopment concentrates movement along formalised routes, CBT initiatives create alternative circuits that reconnect marginalised spaces to tourism flows. Inner lanes, residential courtyards, workshops, and secondary Ghats—largely bypassed by corridor-centric planning—are reactivated through small-scale heritage walks, craft demonstrations, and ritual storytelling.

Fieldwork suggests that these practices function as spatial repair mechanisms. By drawing visitors into less visible areas, CBT redistributes economic activity and mitigates the sharp spatial inequalities produced by linear redevelopment. Importantly, these circuits are flexible and relational, shaped by daily assessments of crowd density, policing intensity, and seasonal demand. Such spatial adaptability highlights CBT's potential as a bottom-up urban practice that responds dynamically to the lived geography of sacred cities.

Livelihood Diversification and Risk Mitigation

Another key opportunity lies in livelihood diversification. Rather than replacing traditional occupations, CBT practices often extend them. Boatmen supplement rides with storytelling; vendors add interpretive elements to ritual goods; women engaged in home-based production link craft to pilgrimage narratives. This diversification reduces dependence on single income streams that are vulnerable to regulatory disruption or fluctuating footfall.

Crucially, diversification also mitigates risk without requiring formal capital investment. Most initiatives observed during fieldwork relied on existing skills, social networks, and cultural knowledge. This low-entry threshold allows participation by workers who are otherwise excluded from formal tourism markets, reinforcing CBT's relevance in contexts dominated by informality.

Collective Organisation without Formalisation

Fieldwork highlights a distinctive form of collective organisation underpinning CBT in Varanasi. Rather than registered cooperatives or institutional structures, collaboration takes the form of informal, trust-based arrangements. Boatmen coordinate shifts and share information about profitable times; artisans collaborate with guides; women producers pool resources and rotate market access.

These arrangements enable collective resilience while avoiding the risks associated with formalisation, such as taxation, licensing fees, or exclusion from sacred spaces. While fragile, such collectivities represent an alternative governance logic grounded in mutual dependence and shared vulnerability. They demonstrate that community-based tourism can function effectively without being absorbed into bureaucratic frameworks that often undermine informal livelihoods.

Gendered Opportunities through Embedded Tourism

Although women face structural constraints, CBT creates specific opportunities that align with gendered patterns of labour. Home-based tourism activities—ritual production, storytelling, preparation of offerings—allow women to participate in tourism without abandoning domestic responsibilities. Fieldwork indicates that when women collectively negotiate production schedules and pricing, their earnings become more stable and their bargaining power increases.

Moreover, women often serve as custodians of ritual knowledge transmitted through practice rather than formal training. CBT provides a platform to valorise this knowledge, positioning women not as auxiliary labour but as cultural authorities. While these

opportunities remain uneven, they point to pathways for more inclusive tourism that recognise gendered forms of sacred labour.

Slowing Down Sacred Tourism

Finally, CBT offers the possibility of temporal reconfiguration. Redevelopment prioritises speed, throughput, and crowd circulation. In contrast, community-based practices—workshop visits, narrative boat rides, ritual explanations—encourage slower forms of engagement. These temporal shifts are not merely experiential; they protect ritual integrity by allowing practices to unfold with explanation and care.

By aligning tourism with sacred rhythms rather than administrative schedules, CBT creates space for religious meaning to persist within a highly regulated environment. This represents a critical opportunity for sacred cities facing the risk of ritual erosion under mass tourism.

Discussion

The Varanasi case illustrates that sacred urban redevelopment does not operate as a simple displacement mechanism. Instead, governance is enacted through everyday regulation, moral scrutiny, and spatial reorganisation. Informal workers respond not through formal contestation but through incremental negotiation, self-regulation, and collaboration, highlighting the interplay of resilience and vulnerability.

These findings underscore three key insights:

Informality as constitutive: Informal religious economies are not residual or marginal; they sustain sacred urban life and are central to ritual continuity (Vidyarthi, 1961; Vidyarthi & Saraswati, 1979). Policies ignoring them risk eroding the very foundations of sacred space.

Negotiated governance: Governmentality is exercised subtly, requiring workers to interpret rules, anticipate shifts, and adapt continually (Foucault, 1991). This reveals the importance of understanding power as enacted in everyday practices rather than formal instruments alone.

Tourist engagement and cultural continuity: Participatory initiatives—craft demonstrations, guided narratives, heritage walks—allow communities to mediate the tourist gaze while preserving ritual and artisanal knowledge (Urry, 1990; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Such practices illustrate how sacred meaning and economic survival can coexist under constrained conditions.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the transformation of Varanasi through the lens of everyday religious labour and community-based tourism, arguing that the redevelopment of sacred cities cannot be understood solely in terms of infrastructure, heritage enhancement, or tourism growth. Instead, redevelopment unfolds as a reconfiguration of lived sacred economies—reshaping how space is accessed, how rituals are performed, and how

livelihoods are sustained. By foregrounding fieldwork encounters with boatmen, vendors, women ritual producers, and priests, the study demonstrates that sacred space in Varanasi is continuously produced through labour, negotiation, and adaptation rather than through monumental form alone.

The findings reveal that state-led redevelopment initiatives such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor have generated a paradoxical urban condition. On the one hand, they have enhanced visibility, circulation, and symbolic coherence between the temple and the Ganga. On the other hand, they have intensified regulatory control, spatial unevenness, and economic precarity for informal workers embedded in sacred geographies. Rather than producing clear inclusion or exclusion, redevelopment creates zones of uncertainty in which livelihoods depend on the ability to interpret shifting rules, manage surveillance, and adjust practices in real time.

Community-based tourism emerges within this context not as a stable model or formal intervention but as an adaptive urban practice. Fieldwork shows that CBT in Varanasi operates through informal collaboration, narrative innovation, and spatial reworking. Boatmen combine transport with storytelling; artisans transform workshops into sites of interpretation; women integrate ritual production with pilgrimage narratives; priests recalibrate ritual sequences to accommodate administrative constraints. These practices do not replace traditional religious labour but extend it, enabling communities to retain cultural authority while mitigating economic risk.

Importantly, the paper cautions against romanticising CBT as inherently empowering. Opportunities created through community-based practices are unevenly distributed and constrained by gender, caste, spatial location, and access to social networks. Women's labour remains partially invisible, inner neighbourhoods remain marginalised, and informal collaborations remain vulnerable to regulatory disruption. Yet it is precisely this fragility that makes CBT analytically significant. Rather than offering a blueprint for sustainable tourism, CBT reveals how sacred economies survive within regimes of urban control by remaining flexible, relational, and grounded in local knowledge.

By integrating empirical analysis with insights from governmentality, the sacred complex, and the tourist gaze, the paper contributes to broader debates on urban governance and informality. It shows that governance in sacred cities operates not only through laws and infrastructure but through moral regulation, aesthetic norms, and surveillance that reshape everyday conduct. Sacred labour is increasingly required to appear orderly, respectable, and legible to administrative and tourist expectations. Community-based tourism becomes one of the few spaces where local actors can negotiate these pressures without fully submitting to formalisation.

The case of Varanasi thus offers important implications for understanding religious tourism in contemporary urban India. It suggests that the sustainability of sacred cities cannot be secured through corridor-centric planning or heritage spectacle alone. Instead, it depends on the recognition of lived religious economies and the everyday negotiations that sustain them. Policies that ignore informal labour, compress ritual time, or prioritise visual order risk eroding the social foundations of sacred urbanism.

Ultimately, this paper argues that sacred cities should be approached not as sites to be curated but as social worlds to be inhabited. Community-based tourism, in its everyday, improvised forms, provides a window into how residents continue to inhabit Varanasi as a living sacred city amid rapid urban change. Recognising these practices does not require romantic preservation but an engagement with the realities of informality, uncertainty, and collective adaptation that define sacred urban life today.

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