



## URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND LEGAL BATTLES: THE BIHARI JI CORRIDOR AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

**DR. RAJESH SINGH**

Principal secretary, Vidhan parishad  
U.P. Secretriare Lucknow

### **Abstract:**

Mathura, an ancient city in the central part of India, stands as a profound testament to the enduring interplay of power, piety, and contestation across millennia. Revered as the birthplace of Lord Krishna, its urban fabric has been continuously shaped by its sacred identity, evolving from a significant trade hub in ancient times to a bustling pilgrimage center today. Archaeological excavations reveal a gradual growth from a village to an important city during the Vedic age, characterized by the Painted Grey Ware and Northern Black Polished Ware cultures. Its strategic location at the junction of major trade routes connecting the Indo-Gangetic Plain with central India and the west coast cemented its importance as an economic and cultural nexus. Under the Mauryan and Kushan empires, Mathura flourished, becoming a prominent center for art and culture, particularly noted for the Mathura School of Art. Even through periods of rule by various dynasties, including the Mughals and the British, Mathura retained its status as a major Hindu pilgrimage site and a hub for the Krishna *bhakti* cult.

**Key Words:** *bhakti* cult, *kunj galis*, Banke Bihari Corridor

### **Introduction:**

The city's historical trajectory demonstrates a continuous process of urban development, often influenced by its spiritual magnetism. Vrindavan, intrinsically linked to Mathura as the site of Lord Krishna's childhood exploits, also evolved over centuries from natural groves into a densely built pilgrim town. Temples became the nuclei of urban precincts, connected by a network of narrow, winding lanes known as *kunj galis*. This organic growth, while embodying deep spiritual and cultural significance, has presented unique challenges in contemporary times.

In recent decades, the rapid increase in religious tourism has placed immense pressure on the existing, often organically evolved, infrastructure of Mathura and Vrindavan. This influx has led to severe congestion, heightened safety

concerns, and environmental degradation. The sheer volume of devotees, particularly during major festivals, often overwhelms the narrow streets and limited facilities, creating hazardous conditions. In response to these escalating pressures, state governments across India have embarked on ambitious "corridor" projects aimed at modernizing and managing pilgrimage sites. These initiatives often draw comparisons to large-scale urban transformations in other sacred cities, such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi.

This chapter argues that the proposed Banke Bihari Temple Corridor project in Vrindavan, while ostensibly a response to public safety and pilgrimage management needs, embodies a broader trend of state intervention in sacred urban spaces. This intervention is characterized by a fundamental tension between developmental imperatives and the preservation of intangible heritage. The chapter will explore how such initiatives trigger multifaceted debates, protests, and legal battles that reflect deep-seated conflicts over land, livelihood, religious authority, and the very definition of sacred space in a modernizing India. By examining the premise of the Banke Bihari Corridor project, the ensuing debates and protests, the significant legal interventions, and drawing comparative insights from similar urban transformations in Kashi, Ayodhya, Ujjain, and Puri, this chapter aims to illuminate the future trajectories for Mathura's urban development and sacred heritage, contributing to a nuanced understanding of its millennial nexus of power, piety, and contestation.

### **The Premise of the Bihari Ji Temple Corridor Project: Modernization and Pilgrimage Management**

The Banke Bihari Temple Corridor project in Vrindavan represents a significant state-led initiative aimed at transforming the pilgrimage experience around one of India's most revered Vaishnav shrines. Its premise is rooted in a combination of immediate necessity and a broader vision for religious tourism development. The primary catalyst for the proposed Banke Bihari Corridor project was a tragic stampede-like incident during Janmashtami celebrations in 2022, which resulted in two fatalities.<sup>14</sup> This unfortunate event brought into sharp focus the severe overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure plaguing the temple area, particularly during peak festive seasons. The existing temple area, a mere 1,200 square feet, attracts approximately 50,000 visitors daily, a number that can swell to 1.5-2 lakh on weekends and over 5 lakh during festivals, leading to recurrent stampede-like conditions. In response to these pressing safety concerns, the Allahabad High Court, in September 2023, directed the state government to implement a corridor plan to manage crowds and ensure safety.

<sup>1</sup>. This judicial directive propelled the Uttar Pradesh government to propose the

Banke Bihari Corridor, articulating several key objectives:

- **Easing Congestion and Improving Devotee Movement:** The foremost objective is to alleviate the severe congestion in the narrow lanes surrounding the temple, which are currently ill-equipped to handle the massive influx of devotees. The project aims to create smoother devotee movement and enhance safety, especially during peak festivals.
- **Enhancing Overall Pilgrimage Experience and Safety:** Beyond mere crowd control, the project seeks to create a more comfortable, aesthetically pleasing, and spiritually enriching environment for pilgrims. This comprehensive approach includes strengthening emergency access for medical and security services, providing essential public facilities, and improving the overall ambiance of the sacred space. The proposed corridor is designed to accommodate up to 50,000 pilgrims at a time, a significant increase from the current capacity, thereby mitigating the risk of future stampedes.
- **Promoting Religious Tourism:** The project aligns with the Uttar Pradesh government's broader strategic goal of promoting religious tourism and modernizing infrastructure across the state. This vision positions Vrindavan as a key destination within the larger "Krishna Circuit" initiative, aiming to attract a broader visitor base, including domestic and international tourists.

The emphasis on the 2022 stampede as the direct cause for the corridor project suggests a reactive approach to urban planning in sacred sites. Instead of proactive, long-term infrastructure development to anticipate growing pilgrim numbers, major interventions are frequently triggered by a crisis, such as a stampede or a structural collapse. This pattern indicates that safety concerns, while legitimate and paramount, can serve as a potent justification for rapid, large-scale urban transformations that might otherwise face greater resistance due to their profound impact on existing urban fabrics and communities. This phenomenon is not unique to Vrindavan but is observable in other pilgrimage sites across India where tragedies often precede ambitious infrastructural overhauls, highlighting a systemic challenge in managing sacred urbanism, where development is often crisis-driven rather than based on comprehensive, preventive planning, potentially leading to hurried execution and unforeseen consequences<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the project's objectives simultaneously aim to "enhance the pilgrimage experience" and to "promote religious tourism." This indicates a subtle but significant shift in the conceptualization of sacred sites.

---

<sup>1</sup> Singh Rajesh and Singh Purushottam,  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394307178\\_mathura\\_sakti\\_dharm\\_anistha\\_aura\\_sangharsa\\_ki\\_sahastrabdika\\_kariyam](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/394307178_mathura_sakti_dharm_anistha_aura_sangharsa_ki_sahastrabdika_kariyam)

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Purushottam Singh, *Mathura: A Millennial Nexus of Power, Piety, and Contestation (1000 BCE - Present)*, M.B.S. College Varanasi, 2025, p. 783

While traditional pilgrimage is primarily a spiritual journey focused on devotion and austerity, "religious tourism" inherently carries economic dimensions, emphasizing comfort, convenience, and commercial opportunities. The inclusion of "shops and cultural display spaces" and the expected surge in real estate prices around the temple further underscore this economic orientation. This duality reflects a national trend where spiritual sites are increasingly viewed as economic assets, leading to infrastructure projects that cater to both spiritual needs and commercial interests. This can result in a tension between maintaining the sanctity and traditional character of the site and maximizing its economic potential, potentially leading to the "commercialization of a sacred site".

### **Project Scope and Features**

The proposed Banke Bihari Corridor is an ambitious redevelopment initiative spanning approximately 5 to 5.5 acres around the historic Shri Banke Bihari Temple, which was built in 1862. The project involves a substantial investment, initially cited as 500 crore, though some reports suggest it could be up to 600 crore.

Key features of the corridor are designed to streamline pilgrim movement and enhance facilities:

- **Widened Pedestrian Pathways and Public Plazas:** To ensure smooth movement and reduce crowding, particularly in the notoriously narrow "Kunj Galiyan" that characterize Vrindavan's traditional urban fabric. Designated public plazas will serve as rest zones and congregation points for devotees.
- **Modern Utility Systems:** The plan includes the installation of underground utility systems for electricity and water, aimed at eliminating surface-level clutter and improving urban aesthetics. This is complemented by enhanced lighting and security infrastructure to boost safety and surveillance within the area.
- **Essential Public Facilities:** The corridor is designed to provide comprehensive amenities crucial for managing large pilgrim footfall. These include readily accessible restrooms, drinking water stations, covered waiting areas for devotees, and dedicated medical and emergency response units. Additional facilities such as shoe and luggage stands are also planned to enhance convenience. The project also makes provisions for dedicated dispensaries and VIP rooms, catering to diverse needs of visitors.
- **New Access Routes:** To ease foot traffic and increase overall accessibility to the temple, three new entry routes are under development: Jugalghat, which will provide direct access from the Yamuna riverbank; Vidyapeeth Square, functioning as a central approach point for incoming visitors; and Jadoun Parking, serving those arriving by vehicle and offering a seamless transition to

pedestrian entry. A dedicated 900 square meter parikrama path is also included, allowing devotees to perform the sacred circumambulation around the temple.

- **Commercial and Cultural Spaces:** The project design allocates an area of 800 square meters specifically for shops selling Puja items, catering to the immediate needs of pilgrims. Furthermore, it includes provisions for cultural display spaces and a cultural center aimed at showcasing Vrindavan's rich heritage, integrating cultural promotion with pilgrimage facilitation.

Upon completion, the corridor is projected to accommodate up to 50,000 pilgrims simultaneously without obstructing local traffic lanes or compromising safety, a significant increase from the temple's current limited capacity.

The detailed features of the Banke Bihari Corridor, including widened pathways, public plazas, underground utilities, and specific amenities, bear a striking resemblance to the infrastructural interventions seen in other major temple corridor projects across India, such as the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor in Varanasi. This similarity suggests the application of a standardized "corridor model" for religious urban development across the nation. While the design is intended to "complement the heritage architecture of Vrindavan", the scale and nature of these interventions, which involve the potential razing of over 300 buildings for a wide corridor, inherently transform the dense, organic urban fabric of the old city<sup>3</sup>. This standardization might lead to a homogenization of unique sacred urban landscapes, where local architectural nuances and traditional spatial relationships are sacrificed for a universal "pilgrim experience" that prioritizes efficiency and modern aesthetics. The tension between the stated goal of complementing heritage and the reality of large-scale demolition for widened pathways points to a potential superficiality in heritage integration, where the 'spirit' of the place might be lost even as its 'functionality' is improved.

### **Government's Vision and Role**

The Banke Bihari Corridor project is unequivocally spearheaded by the Uttar Pradesh government, reflecting its broader policy agenda of promoting religious tourism and modernizing infrastructure across the state.<sup>18</sup> This initiative is part of a larger strategy to develop pilgrimage circuits, including Mathura, Vrindavan, and Ayodhya, under the "double engine government" framework, a term often used to denote alignment between state and central government policies. The Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority (MVDA) plays a central role in the project's implementation, overseeing

---

<sup>3</sup> Singh, Purushottam,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395791676\\_Mathura\\_A\\_Millennial\\_Nexus\\_of\\_Power\\_Piety\\_and\\_Contestation\\_1000\\_BCE\\_-\\_Present](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395791676_Mathura_A_Millennial_Nexus_of_Power_Piety_and_Contestation_1000_BCE_-_Present)

aspects such as land acquisition and planning for relocation of affected families and businesses.

The government's vision, articulated by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, emphasizes developing infrastructure facilities while simultaneously "preserving the cultural and religious integrity of the area" and "generating employment opportunities". This comprehensive vision includes plans for a digital museum, a convention center, a Green Path, and eco-restoration of forests in the Braj region, indicating a multi-faceted approach to urban development that extends beyond mere infrastructure. The "Smart City" initiatives and "Vision 2030" plans for Mathura-Vrindavan further underscore a commitment to sustainable and inclusive urban growth, aiming to transform the region into a "model city" that balances spiritual sanctity with modern conveniences.<sup>9</sup>

The direct and assertive role of the Uttar Pradesh government in conceptualizing, funding, and implementing the Banke Bihari Corridor <sup>18</sup>, coupled with its broader "religious tourism" agenda and "Vision 2030" plans <sup>10</sup>, signifies a profound shift in the governance of sacred spaces. Historically, the evolution of Mathura and Vrindavan was often more organic, driven by Vaishnava saints, royal patronage, and local communities who shaped the urban landscape through devotional practices and traditional livelihoods.<sup>4</sup> The current approach centralizes decision-making power with the state, often framing it as essential for "modernization" and "efficiency." This trend, visible across India's pilgrimage cities, indicates the emergence of a distinct "pilgrimage urbanism" where the state actively shapes religious landscapes not just for spiritual facilitation but also for economic development and political symbolism. This can lead to significant power imbalances, where traditional custodians and local communities find their historical roles diminished and their voices marginalized in the face of state-backed development.

#### **Key Features the Banke Bihari Corridor Project**

The proposed Banke Bihari Corridor project, despite its stated objectives of improving pilgrim safety and facilities, has met with significant opposition from various stakeholders, including the Goswami community (hereditary priests), local residents, and traders. These debates and protests highlight deep-seated concerns regarding the project's impact on Vrindavan's unique heritage, the displacement of communities, and the perceived commercialization of a sacred site.

The Goswami community, who have historically managed the Banke Bihari Temple since its establishment in 1862, have been vocal in their opposition. They express profound fears that the government's redevelopment plan "wants to turn this place of faith into a picnic spot," thereby compromising the spiritual sanctity and traditional ambience of the temple. Priests and locals alike have raised concerns about preserving the spiritual ambience and traditional character of Vrindavan, arguing that the project disregards the centuries-old customs and traditions established by their forefathers. A

significant point of contention is the alleged lack of consultation with key stakeholders, including the Goswami community, during the planning and formation of the Banke Bihari Trust. This perceived exclusion fuels a sense of distrust and a belief that their traditional authority is being undermined.

The intensity of this opposition is underscored by extreme measures, such as the threat by priests to relocate the Banke Bihari deity (Thakurji) to another site if their concerns are not heeded. The articulation of fear that Vrindavan might become a "picnic spot" and lose its "religious antiquity" highlights a fundamental tension between a state-driven vision of modern, accessible pilgrimage and the local understanding of sacred space. For the Goswami community and many residents, the "Kunj Galiyan" the narrow, winding lanes around the temple are not merely passageways but "sacred heritage sites" intrinsically linked to the Vaishnav Bhakti tradition. These lanes, some centuries old, are believed to be the sites of Lord Krishna's divine *lila* (play) and are central to the living devotional practices of the community. This clash epitomizes a recurring theme in heritage conservation globally, where top-down "beautification" or "modernization" projects often clash with local, lived heritage, leading to accusations of "Disneyfication" or "Kyotoisation," where the unique, organic character of a place is replaced by a sanitized, tourist-friendly version.

This resistance also reveals a critical disjuncture between formal heritage preservation policies and the dynamic nature of "living heritage." While the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) might focus on preserving older temples as "historic monuments" that may no longer function as active devotional sites, the protests in Vrindavan underscore the deep emotional and spiritual attachment to spaces that are continuously animated by ritual and belief. The locals' protests, including writing letters in blood to the Chief Minister, emphasize the performative and embodied nature of their heritage. The corridor project, by potentially demolishing these living spaces and disrupting the *kunjgalis*, risks severing these intangible connections, thereby undermining the very spiritual essence it purports to enhance<sup>4</sup>.

A significant source of contention revolves around the displacement of residents and businesses. The land acquisition for the corridor is set to impact at least 275 property owners, including approximately 200 shopkeepers. The Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority (MVDA) has identified four large plots in Rukmini Vihar and Sunrakh Bangar in Vrindavan to construct 350 flats for the relocation of these affected families. Shopkeepers are reportedly to be allocated new shops within the corridor, with compensation provided based on their land and property.

---

<sup>4</sup> Carey, W.H., *The Good Old Days of the Honourable John Company*, Argus Press: Simla, 1882.

Despite these plans, affected communities express deep skepticism and dissatisfaction. Gyanendra Kishor Goswami, a member of the temple management, has rejected the relocation proposal, perceiving it as a "conspiracy to take control of the temple from the Goswamis". He questions the sensibility of shifting families who have lived near the temple for generations "overnight," and states that the proposed compensation is unacceptable. This sentiment is echoed by political figures, with Samajwadi Party national president Akhilesh Yadav terming the project "corridor corruption." He alleges that the BJP government's aim is to "take control of the donations coming in at the religious sites along with the wealth, property and funds owned by these places of worship," and to "destroy small shops and their owners of their limited incomes and take one-time hefty sums from big showroom chains," thereby leaving locals jobless and enabling outsiders to control the area.