



*From the MixCache.com library*

SAMPLE COPY

# Sacred Circuits: Mapping Religion, Pilgrimage, and Power in India

MixCache.com

SAMPLE COPY

## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Mapping the Sacred: Theoretical Approaches to Ritual Geographies
- **Chapter 2** The Tapestry of Faith: Historical Roots of Pilgrimage in India
- **Chapter 3** Sacred Economies: Pilgrimage, Charity, and Local Livelihoods
- **Chapter 4** Temple Trusts: Governance, Revenue, and Social Responsibilities
- **Chapter 5** Crossing Borders: Interfaith Pilgrimages and Shared Sacred Sites
- **Chapter 6** Networks of Devotion: Pilgrims, Guides, and Brokers
- **Chapter 7** Rituals on the Move: Mobility, Migration, and Pilgrimage Practice
- **Chapter 8** Faith and Local Governance: Religious Institutions as Political Players
- **Chapter 9** Gendered Journeys: Women, Devotion, and Access to Sacred Spaces
- **Chapter 10** Marketplaces of the Divine: Religion, Commerce, and Urban Growth
- **Chapter 11** Contesting Space: Conflict and Negotiation in Pilgrimage Centers
- **Chapter 12** Pilgrimage in the Digital Age: Technology and Transformation
- **Chapter 13** Performing Belief: Festivals, Fairs, and Communal Identity
- **Chapter 14** The Politics of Purity: Caste, Ritual, and Spatial Exclusion
- **Chapter 15** The State and the Sacred: Regulation, Patronage, and Intervention
- **Chapter 16** Environmental Dimensions: Pilgrimage and the Ecology of Sacred Landscapes
- **Chapter 17** Memory, Myth, and Mapping: Narratives of Hallowed Terrain
- **Chapter 18** Diaspora Devotions: Transnational Pilgrimage Networks
- **Chapter 19** Healing Journeys: Pilgrimage, Health, and Wellbeing
- **Chapter 20** Religious Reform and Modernization: Changing Paths and Practices
- **Chapter 21** Icons and Infrastructures: Symbolism, Monumentality, and the Built Environment
- **Chapter 22** Visualizing the Sacred: Art, Architecture, and Cartography in Religious Spaces
- **Chapter 23** Margins and Centers: Peripheral Shrines and Mainstream Power
- **Chapter 24** Sacred Futures: Pilgrimage, Innovation, and Sustainability
- **Chapter 25** Toward a New Cartography: Rethinking Religion, Space, and Power in India

## Introduction

Religion in India is not just a matter of the spirit or the intellect; it is deeply woven into the fabric of landscapes, economies, and political life. The physical movement of people—pilgrims journeying to sacred places—has for centuries shaped both individual destinies and collective identities. As these journeys unfold, they navigate not only trails and rivers but also complex webs of power and patronage, belief and bargaining, separation and integration. This book invites its readers to traverse those networks, offering an anthropology-driven study of India's ritual geographies and the political influence that pulses through them.

India's sacred circuits—networks of pilgrimage routes, temple towns, holy rivers, and shrines—have played a decisive role in the formation of regional cultures and the assertion of political authority. Temples, monasteries, and shrines have acted as nodal points for economic exchange, political negotiation, and social regulation. The governance structures embedded within temple trusts and religious boards possess stunning capacities for resource mobilization and distribution, often rivalling or even surpassing local government bodies. Across the urban and rural divide, religious institutions become arbiters not just of ritual, but also of rights, property, and welfare. In exploring these intersections, this book aims to develop a nuanced understanding of how faith extends beyond ritual, becoming implicated in governance and policy.

The contemporary study of religion in India often oscillates between grand abstractions and localized case studies. Sacred Circuits offers a bridge: by weaving together ethnographic vignettes with analyses of larger patterns, it illustrates how faith acts both as a personal journey and as a vector for collective action and power. The chapters draw on rich fieldwork, interviews, and archival research to capture the lived realities of devotees, priests, officials, and entrepreneurs who populate these ritual landscapes. Their stories reveal both the possibilities and the perils that religious networks can engender—from economic uplift and social solidarity to exclusionary politics and ecological stress.

Central to this exploration are questions concerning access and authority. Who gets to define the sacred? How are roads, resources, and rituals allocated and contested? In what ways do caste, gender, and class shape participation in pilgrimage economies and governance of sacred spaces? By tracing the movement of bodies, ideas, and commodities across India's pilgrimage networks, the book foregrounds the imbrication of religion with social justice and marginality, as well as with social privilege and power.

For policymakers, the implications are profound. Effective interventions in areas as

diverse as tourism, urban planning, resource management, and minority rights require an appreciation of the religious infrastructures that structure everyday life. For scholars and informed readers, the book aims to expand the toolkit for analyzing the shifting landscapes of faith, power, and identity in the subcontinent. In inviting you to trace India's sacred circuits, this work hopes to inspire deeper consideration of how pilgrimage and religion continue to shape—and be shaped by—the dynamic interplay of tradition, modernity, and politics.

SAMPLE COPY

## CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Sacred: Theoretical Approaches to Ritual Geographies

The concept of “sacred circuits” is more than just a poetic turn of phrase; it is a conceptual lens through which we can understand the intricate relationship between belief, space, and power in India. To map these circuits is to do more than simply draw lines on a chart; it is to trace the pathways of devotion, the flows of resources, and the contours of influence that have shaped the subcontinent for millennia. This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for such a cartography, exploring the anthropological approaches that allow us to move beyond a simplistic view of religion as merely personal faith and instead embrace its deeply spatial and politically charged dimensions.

Anthropology, at its heart, grapples with understanding human experience in all its messy complexity. When applied to religion, this means looking beyond theological doctrines and into the lived realities of practitioners. It entails examining how beliefs are embodied, how rituals are performed, and how sacred meanings are inscribed onto landscapes. This perspective is particularly potent in India, where religion is rarely confined to designated places of worship but permeates daily life, imbuing mundane spaces with profound significance and transforming physical journeys into spiritual quests.

One foundational concept in understanding ritual geographies is that of “sacred space.” This isn't just about a particular temple or shrine, but about how certain areas are set apart, imbued with meaning, and distinguished from the profane. This demarcation can be achieved through myth, ritual, or sustained practice, turning an ordinary river into a goddess, a mountain into a deity's abode, or a village well into a site of healing. The creation of sacred space is an act of cultural production, a collective agreement that certain locations hold special power or significance, demanding particular forms of behavior and respect.

However, sacred space is rarely static or uncontested. Its meaning can shift, its boundaries can be permeable, and its control can be a source of intense negotiation. Anthropologists have long noted how power dynamics play a crucial role in defining and maintaining sacred sites. Who has the authority to declare a space sacred? Who controls access to it? Who benefits from its sanctity? These are not trivial questions, as they often reveal underlying social hierarchies, economic interests, and political agendas. A pilgrimage site, for instance, might be revered by millions, but its administration, infrastructure, and even its narratives are often shaped by a select few.

The idea of "ritual geography" extends this concept of sacred space by emphasizing movement and connection. It recognizes that sacred sites are not isolated points but are often linked together, forming networks, routes, and constellations of meaning. Pilgrimage is, of course, the most obvious manifestation of ritual geography, involving purposeful journeys to sacred destinations. But ritual geography also encompasses the less overt movements of deities in processions, the spread of religious narratives across regions, and the diffusion of ritual practices from one community to another. It's about how religious ideas and practices travel, transforming and being transformed by the landscapes they traverse.

Early anthropological studies of pilgrimage often focused on the individual pilgrim's transformative experience, highlighting the liminality of the journey—the suspension of ordinary social roles and the emergence of a heightened sense of *communitas*. Victor Turner's influential work, for example, emphasized the temporary breakdown of social structures during pilgrimage, leading to a profound sense of shared humanity among diverse individuals. While invaluable, this approach sometimes overlooked the more structured, institutional, and even mundane aspects of pilgrimage. It's not all ecstatic revelations; sometimes it's also about booking train tickets, finding a decent meal, and navigating crowded marketplaces.

More recent scholarship has broadened this perspective, recognizing that pilgrimage is not just an individual spiritual quest but also a profoundly social, economic, and political phenomenon. Pilgrimage routes become arteries for commerce, vehicles for cultural exchange, and stages for political performances. The infrastructure supporting pilgrimage—from guesthouses and restaurants to transport networks and administrative bodies—creates entire economies and often exerts significant influence on regional development. To ignore these dimensions is to miss a huge part of the story.

The concept of "religious networks" further enriches our understanding of sacred circuits. These networks are not just about physical pathways but also about the relationships between people, institutions, and ideas that crisscross the religious landscape. They include the informal connections between devotees sharing stories and recommendations, the formal structures of monastic orders and temple trusts, and the complex interplay between religious leaders and political figures. These networks can be incredibly resilient, adapting to changing social and political circumstances while maintaining their core functions.

Think, for instance, of the elaborate guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) lineages that span generations and regions, disseminating specific philosophical traditions and ritual practices. Or consider the pan-Indian networks of particular devotional movements, whose adherents might be geographically dispersed but remain connected through shared deities, songs, and pilgrimage destinations. These networks act as conduits for

information, resources, and influence, shaping public opinion and sometimes even mobilizing collective action.

The spatial turn in social sciences has provided a powerful impetus for studying ritual geographies. This intellectual movement emphasizes the idea that space is not merely a neutral container for social life but is actively produced, contested, and imbued with social meaning. From this perspective, sacred spaces are not just "there" but are actively constructed through human actions, beliefs, and power relations. Mapping these spaces, therefore, becomes an exercise in deconstructing these constructions and understanding the forces that shape them.

Furthermore, critical geography offers tools to examine how power operates through spatial arrangements. It allows us to ask how certain groups are included or excluded from sacred spaces, how access is regulated, and how religious sites can become arenas for expressing social inequalities. The physical layout of a temple complex, for example, might subtly reinforce caste hierarchies, with certain areas accessible only to specific groups. The narratives associated with a pilgrimage site might privilege certain historical interpretations over others, thereby shaping collective memory and identity.

In India, the intersection of religion and politics is particularly pronounced, making the concept of "ritual geographies" especially salient. Religious institutions often possess considerable temporal power, not just spiritual authority. They own vast tracts of land, manage substantial endowments, employ thousands, and influence millions of voters. Understanding the spatial dimensions of these institutions—their reach, their connections, their embeddedness in local communities—is crucial for grasping their political leverage.

The concept of "moral geographies" also comes into play here, suggesting that landscapes are not only imbued with religious meaning but also with ethical and moral values. Pilgrimage, for example, is often seen as a moral journey, a path towards purification or spiritual merit. The narratives associated with sacred sites often convey moral lessons, reinforcing particular codes of conduct and social norms. These moral dimensions shape how individuals interact with the sacred landscape and with each other within that landscape.

Ultimately, this chapter serves as an invitation to think spatially about religion in India. It encourages us to move beyond abstract notions of faith and to ground our analysis in the tangible realities of landscapes, journeys, and networks. By drawing on these theoretical approaches—sacred space, ritual geography, religious networks, and critical spatial analysis—we can begin to unravel the complex ways in which religion is woven into the very fabric of Indian life, shaping its economies, influencing its governance, and defining its diverse communities. It's about seeing the map not just as a representation of reality, but as a dynamic tool for understanding the forces that

create and continually reshape that reality.

SAMPLE COPY

---

*This is a sample preview. Purchase the book to read the full content.*

Visit [MixCache.com](https://MixCache.com) to purchase the complete book.

SAMPLE COPY