Living Heritage in Urban Space and Cultural Representation of Kurukshetra: A Geographical Study of Gita Mahotsav

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban spaces are increasingly becoming stages upon which cultural identities, historical memories, and political imaginaries are performed, contested, and rearticulated (Loughranet al., 2015). In India, where the sacred and the secular are deeply intertwined within everyday life, the organization and performance of large-scale religious festivals often operate as conduits of heritage representation. One such exemplary case is that of the *Gita Mahotsav*, a state-supported cultural-religious festival held annually in the city of Kurukshetra, Haryana. Known mythologically as the land of the Bhagavad Gita's revelation, Kurukshetra has become a living geography where cosmological pasts are ritualized in the present, turning city spaces into sacred terrains through performative symbolism and institutional narratives (Richardson, 2022).

The concept of '*living heritage*' emphasizes practices that are not fossilized in museums but are dynamically embodied, transmitted, and renewed in the spaces of lived experience (Wijesuriya,2018). In this light, Gita Mahotsav is not simply a religious observance but an expression of cultural continuity and spatial reimagination. Cultural geography has long been concerned with the spatial inscriptions of belief, memory, and performance, and in India's festival-scape, the convergence of these dimensions is richly evident (Bonnemaison, 2005). It examines how cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions are shaped by, and in turn shape, the geographical environments in which they occur. Cultural geography goes beyond the physical characteristics of a landscape to interpret the meanings, symbols, and social processes embedded within it. It seeks to understand how spaces become culturally significant and how cultural identities are expressed spatially.

Over the past decade, Gita Mahotsav has evolved from a localized religious event into a state-curated international cultural phenomenon, receiving participation from countries such as Mauritius, the United Kingdom, and Nepal. This transformation reflects the strategic efforts of state and religious bodies to reframe heritage as a tool of diplomacy and soft power (Algamedi, 2025). The performative dimension of the festival, ranging from mass recitations and art installations to folk dances and heritage parades, serves to construct a specific narrative of India's civilizational ethos. At the same time, the spatial expansion of the festival, which increasingly occupies public grounds, parks, roads, and lakesides, reconfigures the urban layout in ways that demand attention from geographers, urban planners, and sociologists alike (Cudny,2016).

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Sites such as Brahma Sarovar, Jyotisar, and Sannihit Sarovar become both spiritual and performative nodes during the Mahotsav, attracting massive footfall and infrastructural attention. These transformations are not merely symbolic; they carry real material implications for how space is organized, consumed, and controlled (Soja,1985).One local artist, who had been performing at the festival for over five years, remarked, *'Earlier it was just about reciting the Gita; now it is about showing the world who we are. Every corner becomes a stage, every street a memory.'* This statement emphasizes the theatrical and territorial nature of the festival, where identity is not only celebrated but spatially performed.

Spatially, the city undergoes temporary re-architecturing. Temporary gates decorated with Gita verses demarcate religious zones, while LED screens live-stream discourses in public squares. Folk artists from different Indian states perform near historic ghats, and large floats designed as mobile temples parade through civic spaces. These practices produce what geographer Soja(2008) calls *'thirdspace'*, a realm where material, imagined, and lived geographies converge. Kurukshetra's urban body is, during the Mahotsav, inscribed with multiple layers of meaning, sacred, aesthetic, economic, and political.An important feature of this study is its engagement with cultural representation, both in terms of how Kurukshetra is portrayed to its residents and visitors, and how selective elements of its cultural and historical identity are emphasized while others remain peripheral.

Another layer to consider is the economic and infrastructural investment in the festival. Temporary employment surges during the Mahotsav, ranging from security personnel to artisans, food vendors, transport workers, and accommodation services. As urban space is reshaped, certain zones experience increased surveillance, gentrification, and even displacement. Informal vendors, who had been selling wares outside Brahma Sarovar for decades, complained of being pushed out to accommodate official stalls. As one vendor expressed, *'We make this festival local, but the space is no longer ours. The big tents have taken over.'* These lived geographies of exclusion are often absent in the official narrative of spiritual unity and cultural celebration (Bartoliniet al., 2017).
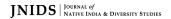
Gita Mahotsav in urban space not only transforms Kurukshetra's spatial identity but also reconfigures relationships of power, access, and memory within the city. The festival's rise reflects a broader trend in India, where urban religious events are reterritorializing cities, inserting ancient cosmologies into modern infrastructural grids. These processes demand deeper academic scrutiny, especially within the frameworks of spatial theory, lived heritage, and representation.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the spatial-cultural dynamics of Gita Mahotsav in the context of Kurukshetra's urban transformation and living heritage.
2. To explore the performative and symbolic geographies of religious festivals and their role in constructing cultural representations of sacred space.
3. To analyze the interaction between local communities, administrative agencies, and tourists in shaping the socio-cultural landscape of Gita Mahotsav.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology rooted in the

interpretative tradition of cultural geography, emphasizing the lived experiences, spatial meanings, and representational practices associated with Gita Mahotsav in Kurukshetra. The research integrates both primary and secondary data sources, using a triangulated approach for comprehensive understanding.Primary data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and field photography. Over the course of December 2024 Gita Mahotsav, 27 in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders including local residents, priests, tourists, street vendors, district cultural officers, and event organizers. These interactions were guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives on space, culture, memory, and identity formation. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed for thematic analysis.Observations focused on the performativity of sacred space and the politics of cultural display in urban settings.

Secondary data were sourced from a wide range of government reports, Haryana Tourism documentation, urban planning archives, district census handbooks, and previous academic literature on religious festivals, cultural geography, and heritage studies. In addition, visual media archives, including posters, brochures, and digital representations of Gita Mahotsav, were analyzed to understand the aesthetics and semiotics of the event.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Gita Mahotsav as Living Heritage

The Gita Mahotsav is not a relic. It is a becoming, a yearly unfolding of belief systems, performative memories, and community expressions. It embodies what scholars term 'living heritage' not simply because it repeats tradition, but because it recreates it anew each time, adapting to modernity without losing its spiritual anchoring (Walter, 2017).As local artist and Gita performer Sanjeev Sharma puts it:

…………..*'Kurukshetra mein Gita bolti hai. Har saal naye avtaar mein'.*(Geeta speaks in Kurukshetra. Every year in a new avatar)In that utterance lies the essence of living heritage, voice, renewal, community, and timeless relevance.

The Bhagavad Gita, delivered in the liminal battlefield of Kurukshetra over 5,000 years ago (as per tradition), has long symbolized the philosophical essence of action without attachment. What makes the Gita Mahotsav compelling as a case of living heritage is its dynamic expression in both ritual form and everyday geographies. The festival is not fossilized in the past, it is relived and re-performed each year, adapting to new technologies, audiences, and interpretations while still tethered to its epic foundations.

4.2 *Ritual Renewal and Sacred Rhythms*

At the heart of Gita Mahotsav lies a choreography of sacred acts that are both ancient and contemporary. The recitation of the 700 verses of the Bhagavad Gita, often collectively performed by thousands of participants, becomes a sonic geography, a soundscape that reverberates through the historic plains of Kurukshetra (Dhiman,2024).The lighting of 18,000 diyas at the Brahma Sarovar creates not just a visual spectacle but a symbolic reaffirmation of cosmic order and dharma (fig 01).

Fig 01: Brahma Sarovar

Source: https://utsav.gov.in/view-event/international-geeta-mahotsav

These practices are not mere rituals; they are acts of remembering through doing. They offer a counterpoint to the museumification of heritage. As observed by scholars of religious performativity, ritual actions sustain traditions by inscribing them into bodies and spaces. At Gita Mahotsav, people do not just commemorate Krishna's teachings;they enact them, whether through street plays, folk performances, or the grand Shobha Yatra, which visually narrates episodes from the Mahabharata using floats and tableaux.
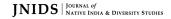

a) Brahma Sarovar, Kurukshetra   b) Brahma Sarovar Temple, Kurukshetra

Fig 02: (a) and (b) gallery: https://internationalgitamahotsav.in/

This ritual renewal not only marks continuity but also allows innovation. In 2023, a digital Gita quiz using augmented reality was launched for school children, showing how even virtual tools are being folded into the performative fabric of tradition (Mann, 2023).

4.3 *Community Participation and Cultural Democracy*

Living heritage must breathe through people;it cannot exist in isolation from the community that sustains it. In this regard, Gita Mahotsav exemplifies a grassroots model of heritage production, where schools, religious akharas, local NGOs, artisans, and farmers participate actively in co-producing the event.In interviews conducted during the December 2024 Mahotsav, multiple respondents emphasized that the festival is 'apnaparv', a people's festival. One retired school teacher who directed a children's street play based on the Gita said, *Yeh sirf tyohar nahin, apni pehchaan hai' (This is not just a festival, it's our identity).*This sentiment was echoed by a tea vendor at Brahma Sarovar who remarked, '*Hum to har saal yeh intezaar karte hain* (…..we wait for this every year). *Jab tak Gita Mahotsav hai, tab tak Kurukshetra zinda hai'* (....As long as there is Gita Mahotsav, Kurukshetra is alive).

These voices reveal how the festival serves as a site of identity and

belonging, particularly in a rapidly urbanizing landscape where traditional values often feel under threat (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013). Community-driven programs such as poster-making competitions, book fairs on Gita literature, Sanskrit chanting sessions, and cleanliness drives reflect a participatory heritage ecology. The festival thus acts as a platform for cultural democracy, where multiple social actors express their versions of sacred heritage (Giorgi et al., 2011).

4.4 Spiritual Reproduction and Spatial Performance

The reproduction of sacred space is a central element of living heritage. Kurukshetra is not just the backdrop of the Mahabharata, it is a theatrical cosmos, where myth, memory, and materiality intersect (McCarter, 2013). The site of Jyotisar, believed to be where Krishna revealed the Gita to Arjuna, becomes a stage each year for live dramatizations and digital light-and-sound shows that reconstruct the battlefield dialogue.

But this is not passive consumption. Devotees often sit under the ancient banyan tree at Jyotisar in silent meditation or narrate their own readings of the Gita to fellow pilgrims. As anthropologist Appadurai (1996) notes, 'the production of locality' in such spaces is actively constituted through narrative and ritual. Jyotisar, in this sense, becomes a living palimpsest, written and rewritten by those who believe, perform, and re-embody its mythos.

These enactments also collapse the gap between past and present, allowing history to become experiential. In one interview, a college student who volunteered in the digital Gita exhibition said: *'Krishna toh har waqt hai, bas har saal naye tareeke se milte hain' (…Krishna is always there, we meet each year in a new way).* This statement captures the layered temporality of living heritage; it is continuous yet always in flux.

Beyond its ritual and emotional significance, Gita Mahotsav also functions as a tool of urban cultural policy. The Haryana government and Kurukshetra Development Board have strategically framed the festival as a 'Global Cultural Event,' drawing delegations from countries like Mauritius, Indonesia, and the UK in recent years. This reflects a shift in the semantics of heritage, from devotion to diplomacy, from spirituality to soft power.

5. Urban Space and Festival Geography

The geography of festivals offers a critical lens into how urban space is produced, consumed, and ritualized. At the heart of this transformation is the concept of sacred mapping. Sacred geography scholars argue that religious festivals reorder the city through symbolic and functional redefinition (Kong, 2001).

For instance, Brahma Sarovar, often a serene water body, becomes the pulsating epicenter of ritual assemblage. Sacred geographies are not static; they are cyclically animated by these ritualistic flows. This festival-induced cartography is not merely symbolic; it manifests in tangible materiality. Temporary infrastructures arise across the city: massive pandals, spiritual theme parks, selfie zones, and devotional stalls that produce ephemeral sacred economies. As Harvey (2012) notes, capitalist modernity has the capacity to co-opt and monetize temporality within urban structures. The festival's commercial overlay, seen through makeshift bazaars, food courts, and cultural crafts pavilions, demonstrates the synergy between pilgrimage and tourism. Here, consumption becomes a devotional act; buyers purchasing Gita replicas or incense sticks participate

in a moral economy of faith.

The juxtaposition of sacred and commercial creates an overlapping geographywhere the spiritual and economic flows reinforce one another. In this context, festival economy functions as a form of 'ritual capitalism', enabling local artisans, NGOs, and traders to mobilise religious affect for livelihoods. Interviews with local shopkeepers highlight this: *'Mahotsav ke dauran hamari kamai teen guna ho jaati hai... par saath hi ek seva ka bhaav bhi hota hai' (…. 'During the festival our earnings triple… but there is also a sense of service)* said a vendor selling traditional utensils near Brahma Sarovar.Simultaneously, the city's infrastructure undergoes reorientation. According to Lefebvre (2013), space is socially produced, and during festivals, this production is accelerated. Gita Mahotsav witnesses a radical redesign in urban flows. Streets are temporarily pedestrianized; digital screens deliver live Gita teachings; sanitation workers are deployed in higher numbers. Urban development authorities collaborate with religious trusts and private vendors to create whatis termed 'progressive sense of place', where rootedness meets motion.

These spatial transformations are not merely logistical but deeply performative. This aligns with Butler's (2025) theory of performativity, where space and identity are co-constructed through repeated acts. The urban space becomes not only a container of faith but also a dynamic expression of it.In this performative landscape, mobility acquires ritual significance. One pilgrim from Karnal shared, '*Ye safar ek yatra hai, sirf pahunchna nahi, balki har kadam ek arpan hai.*' (….this journey is a journey, not just reaching, but every step is an offering). Thus, transit itself becomes theology-in-motion, and the urban layout adapts accordingly.

Additionally, festival digitalization plays a crucial role. Gita Mahotsav's mobile apps, AR exhibits, and QR-coded installations contribute to what we call 'digital spatialities of religion.' These virtual components add layers of interaction where visitors can navigate devotional maps, access Gita verses in multiple languages, and share personalized ritual photos online. This digital infrastructure expands the spatial experience beyond physicality, allowing diasporic audiences to engage virtually and extend the city's ritual borders into translocal realms.

Another critical layer is security and surveillance, often overlooked in festival geography. Drawing from concept of the 'panopticon' the Mahotsav exhibits a visible yet normalized security apparatus, drones, CCTV, rapid-response units, all justified in the name of safety and sanctity. While necessary, these measures also signify how state power coexists with ritual power, subtly choreographing crowd behavior.

Furthermore, the temporal layering of space during the festival showcases how urban rhythms are altered. Time-space compression mind mapbecomes apparent as weeks of planning culminate in a ten-day transformation, wherein thousands of participants engage in simultaneous activities at multiple nodes. This temporary 'acceleration of the sacred'intensifies the city's rhythms and challenges conventional notions of urban planning, requiring flexible models that adapt to these cyclical intensities.The cityscape transforms into a heterotopia a space of difference that challenges, mirrors, and reorders the everyday. Studying such festivals allows cultural geographers to understand the spatialization of belief, the performance of memory, and the contested politics of public culture.

6. Representation and Cultural Politics

Heritage is inherently selective, shaped by contemporary interests rather than historical objectivity. From the elaborate Gita Shloka recitations to the international Gita seminars, the spectacle serves to affirm the state's commitment to India's 'civilizational values'. What emerges here is a curated heritage. These practices often foreground the Bhagavad Gita as the timeless source of Indian wisdom, compatible with global values like peace, leadership, and morality. However, this approach flattens the diversity of interpretations and voices traditionally associated with the Gita. As observed by this method aligns with the politics of Sanskritization, a process by which dominant groups impose elite cultural norms to claim legitimacy over plural folk traditions. The aesthetic presentation of the Mahotsav, often highlighting Brahmin priests, classical dancers, and Sanskrit-speaking dignitaries, leaves limited space for alternate vernacular expressions of spirituality.

This leads to a selective inclusion of identities and cultural expressions. While the festival features over a hundred cultural performances, interviews with local organizers reveal that folk troupes representing Dalit traditions, Sufi influences, or regional syncretic faiths are often sidelined. One local cultural activist shared, '*We applied for a performance of Dalit devotional songs in 2022. The response was delayed, and we never heard back. But they had multiple classical recitals again*' (Interview, Kurukshetra-based performer, 2023). This selective visibility echoes the arguments that assert that heritage production is often an exclusionary act. It reinforces power hierarchies by deciding who speaks, who is seen, and whose version of the past becomes official.

Simultaneously, cultural branding plays a crucial role in representing the Mahotsav on international platforms. With participation from 'Gita parliaments' of various influenced countries, the festival positions itself as a global dialogue on Indian philosophy. These cultural diplomacy efforts serve a dual function: they consolidate India's image as a spiritual superpower, and they offer Haryana a distinct identity in the competitive space of global tourism. As the theory of soft power outlines, cultural events like these are used to attract, rather than coerce, influence over foreign audiences.

However, the very act of such branding involves narrative control. Promotional videos and brochures highlight Kurukshetra as 'the land of dharma,''the cradle of the Gita,' and 'India's spiritual nerve center.' These tropes omit historical conflicts, the multiplicity of regional beliefs, or any contested interpretations of the text. The spiritualization of the city is thus politically coded, turning a living urban landscape into a nationalistic icon. As some scholars articulate, heritage is always about the present;it is not just what is remembered, but also what is *chosen* to be remembered.

In smaller by-lanes of Kurukshetra, alternative rituals persist, like the all-women reading of the Gita in local dialects or grassroots plays reflecting social justice through Arjuna's dilemmas. These acts, though marginal in visibility, offer resistance to the dominant discourse. As reminds us, space is always contested;it is a field of struggle, negotiation, and reimagination.Interviews with citizens reinforce this tension. '*We love the Mahotsav, but it has become more about VIPs than about people like us. I used to read the Gita with my grandmother, now I just watch it on a big screen.*', (Interview in Mahotsav, Dec 2024).

Thus, the cultural politics of representation at Gita Mahotsav reveal both the possibilities and perils of heritage production. While it allows for cultural revival and

international visibility, it also risks becoming a monologic enterprise, where one version of faith, one aesthetic of devotion, and one narrative of identity becomes dominant.
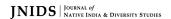
7. Conclusion

This paper explored how the Mahotsav functions as a living heritage, mobilizing communities, repurposing public infrastructure, and generating both economic and spiritual flows. What emerges is a new geography of devotion, fluid, media-savvy, and politically encoded. The Mahotsav becomes a form of cultural choreography, where representation is managed, dissent is minimized, and symbolic capital is maximized. Heritage is not a passive inheritance here; it is contested, spatially enacted, and strategically reframed.

Through examining this phenomenon through the lenses of spatiality, cultural politics, and heritage-making, the study contributes to broader discourses on urban religiosity in India. It demonstrates how city spaces are not just containers of culture but active agents in shaping religious consciousness. The Gita Mahotsav illustrates that in a time of rapid urbanization and political symbolism; festivals can no longer be seen in isolation from their socio-political and spatial contexts.Ultimately, Gita Mahotsav challenges us to rethink the evolving relationship between memory, modernity, and sacred space. It shows how festivals can produce landscapes of belonging, articulate contested identities, and serve as platforms where the everyday meets the eternal. As such, it offers a powerful case for studying contemporary India through the prism of cultural performance and urban transformation.

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