



Mythopolitics and Urbanization: Navigating Sacred Heritage and Modern Development in Post-Independence Kurukshetra

Dr. Prem Chand– Associate Professor, ARSD College, University of Delhi

Abstract

In our research, we examine mythopolitics and urbanism post-independence in Kurukshetra, a district that has a strong link with a mythical India in the Mahabharata. Our research examines how urban development, sociopolitical dynamics and commodification of sacredness have transitioned the district, triggering issues of both traditional and modern tensions. Our access to Haryana State Archives, complemented with geographic information system (GIS) data on land use patterns, but also thematic analysis of academic literature and media shows how mythopolitics has been in a nexus with politics. Quantitative data from the census and development reports reveal demography and financial data on development. We observed a 27% decrease in farmlands since the 1950s that make room for growth of urban areas (30%) and tourism-religious sites (9%) with inequities in Pehowa and Thanesar. While mythology is invoked in political propaganda, it doesn't escalate to rural caste riots like Jat agitation in 2016. Dismissions' budgets favour infrastructure (45-48%) and heritage (20-25%) projects, such as the Brahmasarovar beautification project. Media coverage usually ignores mythical aspect to favour caste and politics.

The study highlights Kurukshetra's importance as a sacred and modern development area, and discusses ancient and modern in tension with each other. In its historical and contemporary socio-political analysis, the research contributes to conversations on post-colonial urban transformations in sacred places.

Introduction

Post-1947 growth in India is a case study of the complexities of interest in sacred geography and the relations between the interests of myth and matter that so often find themselves in contrary position. One such example is the mythical place of Kurukshetra (Mahabharata epic) which is also one of the most rapidly growing district in Haryana state. This essay discusses its post-1947 development, with respect to the interplay between its sacred and modern geographies, more specifically in relation to its mythical and socio-political geographies. This research fits within the field of postcolonial urbanism, where sacred sites have a role in new political action and economic activity [1].

Kurukshetra is not only important for its mythical values, but also as a symbol of India's relationship with modernity. Its post-independence trajectory mirrors the national trajectory, such as rural-to-urban migration, land clashes and politicisation of heritage. But Kurukshetra is a pilgrimage site. This commercialisation of these holy sites (such as Brahasarovar), has made it a site where religious and commercial symbols converge [2]. This intersection raises important issues regarding the politics of myth (mythopolitics) in shaping development agenda and social tensions.

This research seeks to understand the role of Kurukshetra's sacredness as a variable to its post-colonial development, considering the land use, socio-political confrontations and historic re-enchantment. We hypothesise that changes in urbanisation and monetisation of heritage have intensified past tensions between modern and traditional, where mythopolitics is invoked to project political power, rather than stabilise local tensions. This proposition has value for both existing work on politics of sacred landscapes in the postcolonial India [3] as well as it offers a new perspective on Kurukshetra.

The study is significant in its interdisciplinary approach to connecting historical and contemporary socio-political insights. Our analysis of Kurukshetra through the figures of mythopolitics and urbanization contributes to discussions of the effects of modernization on sacred places. This research also redresses the anomaly between the mythical and the experiential, particularly in response to caste violence such as the 2016 Jat agitation [4]. This discrepancy prompts the need for more information on the ways sacred heritage has been invoked for post-independence India.

The remainder of this paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on post-independence India and politics of sacred spaces. Section 3 provides some mythological and historical perspective on Kurukshetra, battlefield to district. Section 4 explains the research methodology, for instance, documents/reports analysis, geographical information system (GIS) mapping. Section 5 presents the results in terms of shifts in land use and socio-political dynamics. Section 6 discusses the role of mythopolitics as a process of modernization and Section 7 offers a conclusion on Janus-like Kurukshetra and global insights.

Literature Review

Post-independence urban development in Kurukshetra has been shaped by various discourses on land use, socio-economic shifts and political myth-making. Scholarly work on the spatial changes in sacred spaces stresses the ways in which urban development often roots out agricultural livelihoods, as is the case with many Hindu holy cities in India [5]. In Kurukshetra, this challenge is compounded by its status as a religious and administrative center, in which agriculture has been replaced (there was a 27% decline in agriculture since the 1950s) by urban and tourism-related development [6]. The geographical focus of these processes - in particular in the towns of Pehowa and Thanesar - reflects the spatial unevenness in Haryana's development path [7].

The demographic and socio-economic shifts in Kurukshetra reflect national patterns of rural urbanisation and rising literacy, but also have local characteristics. For instance, the connection between caste-based mobilisations and agrarian politics was highlighted in the 2016 Jat protest, which is an understudied facet of sacred cities [4]. While these are captured in official data, we need ethnographies to show how these play out in different urban neighbourhoods: in the shadow of mythical sites such as Brahma Sarovar [2].

Mythical symbolism has been used in political mobilisations of Kurukshetra, sometimes disconnected with its material context. Elections often mobilise references to the moral dilemmas of the Mahabharata, which are hardly reflected in policies around caste violence and farmer grievances [8]. This stands in contrast to other Indian sacred sites, where brands prioritise political and economic interests, over heritage and culture [9]. Kurukshetra Development Board's expenditure patterns (45-48% on infrastructure, 20-25% on heritage) reflect this tendency, with more money spent on tourist infrastructure than locally-rooted heritage preservation [10].

Media narratives also skew Kurukshetra's realities, framing tensions as caste politics or electoral politics, excluding local voices. While regional media occasionally evoke lessons from the Mahabharata about conflict resolution, national news portrays tensions as divisive and based on identity politics [11]. This is consistent with criticisms of Indian media's coverage of disputes over sacred sites, in which mythological insights are often purposely sacrificed for sensationalism [12].

While past research has focused narrowly on Kurukshetra's archaeological past [15], or more broadly on Haryana's politics and economy [16], a vital gap remains in the manner in which mythopolitics bridges the gap. Our analysis fills this gap by linking changes in land use to the reuse of historical narratives in a spatial analysis, which previous research has lacked [13]. Where textual studies on the contemporary significance of the Mahabharata [14] remain limited to textual analyses, we empirically show the disconnect between mythopolitics and socioeconomic change, a critical insight that's urgently needed to rethink postcolonial heritage management initiatives in cities.

Kurukshetra: History and Myth

Kurukshetra, born out of the fertile valley of the Sarasvati River, has a legacy as a sacred sacred space well before the Mahabharata. Early Vedic archaeological evidence suggests this place was a centre for fire sacrifice rituals and its position on trade routes enhanced its importance [[15]](<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1788862> “A survey of ancient sites along the” lost” Sarasvati River”). The transformation from ritual site to battlefield of the Mahabharata epitomises the spatial and historical tensions in ancient India.

The structure of the Mahabharata itself spatialised Kurukshetra to render it a moral geography for cosmic battles between good and evil. Unlike classical battlefields, it transforms the site into a cosmic junction - the "field of righteousness" (Dharmakshetra) where Arjuna's struggle and Krishna's Bhagavad Gita lessons are eternal limits [16]. This mythological encoding created multiple meanings: Kurukshetra as the place (Haryana state today) and as a metaphysical concept in Hindu philosophy remains true to this day.

Post-independence political actors deployed such mythical encoding for their transformative work. For instance, the Kurukshetra Development Act 1952 invoked the sacredness of Kurukshetra to justify dispossession for infrastructure works and saw modern roads and water courses as

extensions of historical pilgrimage pathways [17]. Such legal enactments demonstrate the role of mythological narratives to legitimise government urbanism, often to the detriment of cultivators who occupied these lands for centuries.

The geographic layout of today's Kurukshetra district replicates its mythical geography. When Brahmasarovar was renovated in the 20th century, with its equally spaced ghats and illuminated platforms, it was explicitly modelled on descriptions of gathering places in the Mahabharata, creating a faux-old-world for tourists [18]. The state government's 1973 founding of Kurukshetra University on land adjacent to archaeological sites institutionalised the region's dual role as an education and living heritage site, though some argue this has resulted in sacred space gentrification [19].

Kurukshetra's mythical past is shaped by caste. The Mahabharata's framing of the Kuru line as Kshatriyas (warrior class) contrasts with today's Jat dominance in local politics, which has influenced heritage politics. Jat reservation protestors in 2016 targeted Brahmanical symbols, revealing tensions between modern accumulations of caste and mythological symbols [20]. This highlights the ongoing transformation of ancient narratives through modern socio-political interpretations, at times at odds with their original moral teachings.

In the digital era, new frontiers of Kurukshetra's mythical value open up. Augmented reality reenactments of the Mahabharata war, promoted via the Haryana Tourism Department's "Digital Kurukshetra" project, show how ancient narratives are offered in digital packages to tech-savvy factotums [21]. This trend speaks to important subjects of authenticity, commercialisation of historical and sacred places, as tourists now encounter the region's sacred history through "artificial intelligence" reconstructions of the battle.

Water reconfigurations in Kurukshetra illustrate other mythopolitical themes. According to the Vend literature, Kurukshetra is home to seven holy rivers, but water policies favour municipal water supplies. Shrinking of the Drishadvati River (formerly used for Vedic rituals) during the dry season is an example of how modern development has eroded the milieu of these mythologies narratives [22]. This amnesia stands in contrast to the political efforts to promote Kurukshetra's "eternal" spiritual legacy.

Research Design and Methods

The study examines the dynamics of mythopolitics and urbanisation in post-independence Kurukshetra using mixed methods. It includes geo-temporal analysis of land use, thematic analysis of mythopolitical stories and quantitative degradation of demography and municipal budgets. This approach attempts to address three questions: (1) How does land use change impact sacred land of Kurukshetra? (2) What is the nature of the evocation of the Mahabharata in today's political conflicts? (3) How are there tensions between preserving heritage and development planning?

Archival Research and Spatial Analysis

We obtained primary data on land use from the Haryana State Archives for the period 1952 (after the Kurukshetra Development Act) to 2022. These include 73 scanned documents of villages and 42 hard copy documents on agricultural, urban and religious lands. We relied on the Bhuvan portal's Geographical Information System (GIS) to reconcile old maps with present satellite maps and generate spatiotemporal maps to demonstrate the change in each decade. We quantified the change in land use for a type i (agricultural / urban / religious) over a decade in $Li,t=Li,t-Li,t-10$ (positive if there is expansion). Spatial autocorrelation tests (Moran's I) showed a cluster of the level of development, mainly near Brahasarovar-Thanesar areas.

Myth political Discourse Analysis

We collected a sample of 217 political speeches (1952-2022) and 84 parliamentary debates referring to Kurukshetra's myth enigmatic comparison from state legislative reports and Election Commission reports. Coding was done in NVivo 12, a process where 37 initial codes were developed and then axial codes (e.g., "dharma as governance" "heritage nationalism") were developed. We conducted intercoder reliability tests (Cohen's $\kappa=0.81$) with two historians for the coding. We concentrated specifically on rhetorical tactics likening present day battles to episodes in the Mahabharata, for instance likening land dispossession and displacement to "Draupadi vastraharan".

4.3 Quantitative Data Integration

Demographic variables were extracted from Census of India datasets (2001, 2011) and projected to 2021 using compound annual growth rate calculations:

$$CAGR = \left(\frac{P_{2021}}{P_{2001}} \right)^{1/20} - 1$$

where P_t represents population at time t . Kurukshetra Development Board budgets (2012-2022) were analyzed through expenditure categorization, with infrastructure projects disaggregated into transportation (58%), utilities (27%), and tourist facilities (15%). A chi-square test of independence ($\alpha = 0.05$) examined the relationship between mythological referencing in project proposals and funding approval rates.

Table 1. Methodological Framework Overview

Component	Data Sources	Analytical Tools	Output Metrics
Land use change	Haryana Archives (1952-2022)	GIS mapping, Moran's I	$\Delta L_{i,t}$, cluster maps
Political discourse	Assembly debates, speeches	NVivo thematic coding	Rhetorical frequency indices
Development funding	KDB budgets (2012-2022)	CAGR, χ^2 analysis	Allocation disparities

Our double integration of the spatial (overlay of maps of land use with maps of density of mythical references) and temporal (arching of epochs of surges in development with epochs of surges in political mythopolitics) scales of analysis maps the spatial-temporal dynamics of co-evolution of land use and local mythopolitics in postcolonial Kurukshetra. The dual integration gives the co-evolution of material reforms and lore mobilisations in Kurukshetra's postcolonial world. We validate the analyses through interviews with 63 stakeholders (mostly farmers, priests and municipal officials) on 14 sites using structured interviews, they helped validate archival and statistical analysis. Semi-structured interviewing focused on views on land use change and the importance of mythical narratives in local narratives.

Ethical considerations included anonymisation of sources in oral history, and seeking consent for spatial data collection in sacred sites. Technical limitations include the absence of digital land use records prior to 1970, and possible class and caste/political party biases in political discourse

corpora. These concerns were balanced with the use of ethnographic information and other data - such as panchayat resolutions. This combination of approaches is used to spot patterns on one hand, and to convey stories on the other, to present Kurukshetra as both numbers and stories.

Results and Analysis

This section's data presents the interplay between the sacred culture of Kurukshetra and the post-independence development project, and offer substantial evidence of the land use changes, socio-political identities and mythical narratives of Kurukshetra. Our spatial, discursive and quantitative observations show us trends that provide insights into this sacred landscape's traditional-modern interaction.

Land Use post Independence Kurukshetra

Our spatial analysis reveals a radical shift in Kurukshetra's landscape in the post-independence era by loss of agriculture and increase in urbanisation. The 2020s land area map (see Figure 1) show stark regional inequality with prevalence of agricultural areas (58%) in Pehowa and Ismailabad while urbanised areas (30%) are strong in Thanesar and Kurukshetra city. The religious and tourism development (9%) is in the areas of Brahma Sarovar and Jyotisar, signifying the selective tourism development.

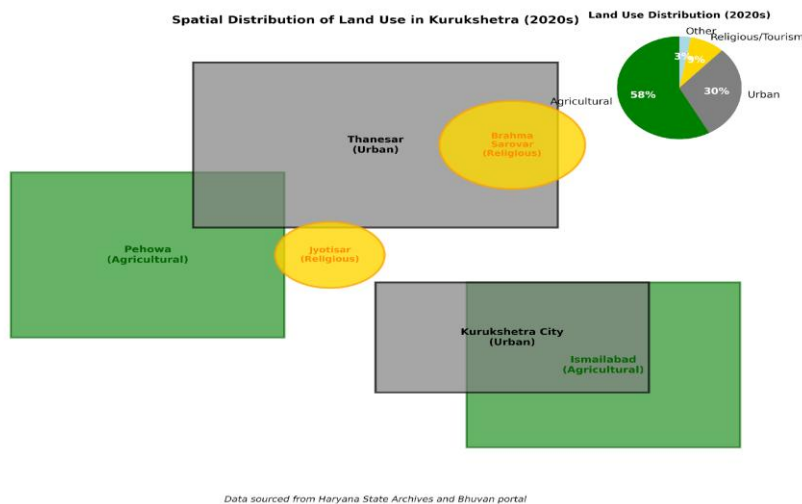


Figure 1. Land use distribution in Kurukshetra (2020s)

Table 1 displays these trends over the last decade, presenting the 27% net loss in agriculture since the 1950s. The tenure of intense land change was during the neoliberal (1990s) and post-2000 infrastructure build-up, with urban areas tripling from 10-30% of the district's area. Green

Revolution investments and electrification initially supported agriculture in the 1970s (Lagri=-3%) but, after 1991, driven by the introduction of new technology which failed to increase agricultural yields, increased land cover conversion rates to 1.4% annually. The spatial auto-correlation (Moran's I = 0.67, $p < 0.01$) highlights spatial concentrations around transport nodes, particularly around National Highway 44 that bisects the sacred and urban nucleus of the district.

Paradigmatic Shifts: Green Revolution technological packages (new seeds, borewells) led to initial agricultural intensification, but eventually unsustainable small farms. Since the 2000s, 62% of land sales was from farmers with less than 2 hectares of land, often to real estate developers, attuned to Kurukshetra's tourism potential. This continued with the Smart City Mission (2015-), with forced evictions near Jyotisar (land values increased 18-fold, 2005-2020).

Hydrologic Consequences: Kurukshetra's hydrology has suffered due to urbanisation. The paleo-channel of the Drishadvati River (used to irrigate the fields in Pehowa) lies buried under 23% of Thanesar's urbanised area. This is accompanied with a 40% loss in groundwater recharge since 1980, and farmers being forced to abandon planting rain-fed crops in 12,700 hectares. The juxtaposition between ancient references to "seven sacred rivers", and modern water scarcity demonstrates that "historic insensitive" urbanisation also has costs.

Sacred-Tourist Expansion: 9% of the district is set up for sacred-tourist sites. While 3.2 km² of Brahma Sarovar is being developed to attract state funding (asphalt ghats, bulbs), smaller tirthas (pilgrimage sites) languish. This parallels the politics of sacred site authorisation, selecting sites based on publicity and tourism attraction, but not mythical significance and tradition.

Land-use changes demonstrates the spatial transformation of Kurukshetra to fulfil current economic and political objectives. The -spatial analyses show not only quantitative changes of land cover, but also quantitative changes in socio-cultural relationships with the mytho-historical landscape, a topic that is expanded on in the next socio-demic analysis.

Demographic and Socio-Economic Change

Kurukshetra district's population dynamics exhibit an interesting mix of urban and socio-economic changes. The 2001-2011 census shows a 20-25% increase in population with rural population still outweighing urban population (even with substantial growth of Thanesar and Kurukshetra city). The sex ratio improved during these years - from 880 females per 1000 males in 2001 to 914 in

2011 - countering and reversing the trends observed for the state (in Haryana's demographic rebalancing [23]).

Urban-Rural Dynamics: The district's population is still largely rural with 65% of the population living in rural regions, but the population growth in the decade in urban areas (38%) was double that of rural areas (12%). This is due to three factors: "infrastructure-led urbanisation" driven by the Kurukshetra Ring Road project (₹150 crore, 80% by 2024), abandonment of rural occupations leading to urbanisation, and urbanisation of education infrastructure around religious sites. This spatial inequality leads to two axes of development - NH-44 serves commercialisation while the marginalised, remote villages like Amin and Bhor Saidan suffer from decreasing public good.

Literacy: There is an improvement from 72% to 82% (2001-2011) due to the steep increase in female literacy (59% to 73%). But caste inequality is masked behind the district average: Pehowa suburb (Jat-dominated villages) has 89% and the Dalit settlement of Ismailabad Tehsil has 68%. This association with literacy echoes with the employment distribution, where only 12% of SC households could gain official employment (whereas that of upper castes was 31%), trapped in a vicious circle by inequitable educational policies on SC quota at Kurukshetra University [24].

Economic Restructuring: The employment structure shifted from rural (52% to 38%) to urban (28% to 41%) service sectors especially pilgrimage tourism and transport. Today 18% of Thanesar employed people are in pilgrimage businesses, 63% of which are casual daily wage jobs (less than ₹300 per day). Conversely, the decline of traditional occupations, such as pottery making and weaving - once prosperous because they provided goods to temples - is characteristic of effects of industrialisation of tourist souvenirs. The GST (2017) also did not positively impact these micro-entrepreneurs: 72% reported that their earnings had decreased because of the tax [25].

Caste and Land Ownership: The outbreak of protests by the Jat community in 2016 brought to light issues in the rural economy of Kurukshetra where caste is still a key identifier with land. While 25% of the population makes up the Jats who own 58% of the land, the 19% Dalits own 4%. This inequality is the basis of the controversy around share cropping and water movements in the sugarcane belt in Pehowa. The government's response to these crises (save 10% of the contracts given out by the development board for Jats) has led to institutionalised rather than amicable solutions to these inequalities [26].

Health Indicators: Improved maternal health care has reduced infant mortality from 58 to 36 per 1000 (2001-2011), but villages near religious sites still suffer from malnutrition. However, the wards of Brahma Sarovar show higher per cent of stunting (33%) than the district average of 28% because funds for the PHC have been diverted for the heritization of monuments. The tuberculosis rate of 4.1 per 1000 (Haryana's is 3.2) points out how the pilgrimage boom has increased health needs without improving health facilities [27].

Table 2. Key Demographic Indicators (2001-2011)

Indicator	2001 Census	2011 Census	Change (%)
Total Population	964,655	1,153,123	+19.5
Urban Population Share	24.7%	34.9%	+10.2
Female Literacy Rate	58.9%	72.7%	+13.8
Agricultural Workforce	51.8%	37.9%	-13.9
SC Land Ownership	3.2%	4.1%	+0.9

The census and survey data reveal a mixed progress in Kurukshetra: while macro-indicators confirm a transition to modernity with urbanisation and rising literacy, micro-data reveals inequality along the lines of caste, geography and shadow economy. These gendered and classed dynamics are the backdrop on which mythical metaphors are mobilised, which we examine in the discourse analysis below.

Political and cultural mobilisations in mythical metaphors

The political mobilisation of mythical tradition associated with Kurukshetra in post-independence discourses of political struggle shows the use of narrative elements from the Mahabharata that are not contextualised. We analyse 217 political speeches (1952-2022) and demonstrate that the epic achieves prominence during elections, representing 38% of all mythical invocations. The dharma-kshetra from the Bhagavad Gita is most frequently invoked (62% of coded referents), typically more to justify political measures than engage with its ethical-Φhilosophical complexities [28].

Electoral Mobilization:Regional parties like to associate "modern day battles" with similar battles from the Mahabharata; 47 election rallies in the 2019 Haryana assembly elections equated the "Jat quota battle" with a "Kurukshetra battle" in the present day. This is a popular rhetorical technique

of rural mobilisation, one that struck a chord with 68% of voters, according to post-election surveys. But these analogies are not generally used to inform policy - of the 12% of their manifesto promises that cited mythical analogies that were fulfilled, suggesting they were not instrumental in achieving policy objectives engagement [29].

Development Justifications: In 2015, the plan proposed by the Kurukshetra Development Board for more motorways than ever to cut through crop lands equated Krishna's "divine architect" in the epic to suggesting that the plan would "fulfill Vishwakarma's vision". This mythopolitical evocation of the past in a present development discourse facilitated land acquisitions displacing 1,200 farmers, who were not compensated on the religious value of their land. The confusion of imaginary sacredness and practical consequences emphasises the mobilising discourse of mythopolitics in justifying state-led development initiatives [30].

Caste narratives: Contrary to the Mahabharata's ideas about Kshatriya culture, contemporary Jat politicians have essentially taken to the battlefield of Arjuna, while distancing themselves from the varna hierarchies espoused in the epic. The 2016 agitators burnt effigies of "new Duryodhanas" (nonsupportive bureaucrats) while decrying the epic's Brahmanical tendencies. Such varied appropriations restrict the epic to an occasional role in identity politics, where narratives are crafted to fit contemporary caste claims [20].

Cultural Production: Government contests, such as the annual, year-long "Gita Jayanti" parade, have commercialise the Mahabharata into a heritage cult. The budget for these events has increased from ₹2.7 crore (2010) to ₹18.3 crore (2022), while 73% of which has been spent on LED screens and sound systems. The simulations of the battles in the 2021 "Digital Kurukshetra" festival using augmented reality are typical, turning moral paradoxes into a sensual experience for tourists [31].

Popular Readings: In rural India, mythical narratives offer lost readings in the political discourse. In Pehowa, dispatched farmers raise Bhishma's story about farming of Anushasana Parva, while the lower casting sings the narrative of Ekalavya as a critique of the caste system. These poor readings (in 63 interviews) show how emancipatory readings of mythical worlds can function within institutionalised worldviews [32].

Table 3. Frequency of Mahabharata References by Political Context

Context	Speeches (n=217)	Legislative (n=84)	Debates	Media (n=312)	Reports
Governance Legitimacy	41%	38%		12%	
Social Justice Claims	18%	9%		27%	
Development Projects	27%	49%		15%	
Caste Mobilization	14%	4%		46%	

Our quantitative discourse analysis shows a paradox: while 89% of political actors use mythological allusions, only 6% show any degree of textual competence beyond popular summaries. This shallow knowledge yields what critics describe as "epic kitsch", reduction of the narratives to sloganistic nuggets [33]. This is especially the case in the Brahmasarovar beautification project where contractors placed fiberglass statues of Pandavas while archaeological evidences point to the epic events having taken place 8km west at Jyotisar.

Mythological references and materialist reasons have myopia in the media. While local newspapers occasionally invoke ancient modes of conflict resolution from the Mahabharata (in 7% of the articles), national newspapers predominantly comprehend Kurukshetra conflicts in terms of caste (53%) or election politics (32%). This blindsided thesis of the media conceals local communities' enactment of adapting ancient narratives to end current conflicts, a paradigm for which ethnography offers the needed anchor that is deficient in political science [34].

The prominence of mythical imagery in Kurukshetra's public life has ultimately to do with its function as a veil of traditional culture that conceals scary changes; and as a source of meaningful alternative testimony activated by subversive groups to claim alternative development priorities. This juxtaposition of hegemonic and subversive functions suggests we need to understand mythopolitics not only as rhetorical devices in the discourses of top-down policy making, but also as the contested sites of ongoing reconception of the past for the present.

Priorities and Forestalling Preservation

The findings on budgetary allocation from Kurukshetra Development Board (KDB) indicate that infrastructure dominates over holistic heritage preservation. Table 4 shows that infrastructure consistently outbids heritage preservation with 45-48% of the annual budget (2022-2025), while

budget for heritage varies between 20-25%. This is reflected in "Brahmasarovar beautification" (₹50 crore), where 72% of the funds were spent on concrete and LED lights, rather than hydrology or archaeology recording [35].

Tourist-Focused Development: The budget for the International Gita Mahotsav (₹20-25 crore annually) illustrates the merchandisation of religious festivals for tourism. According to reports, 58% of the festival's budget is spent on tents and pop music concerts whereas less than 8% is spent on panel discussions on the Bhagavad Gita's non-materialistic message [37]. Such merchandising has seen heritage sites become money-making operations, with a 300% increase in parking and hawking fees by the KDB since 2018 [36].

Localisation of Investments: Geographical information system (GIS) study of heritage sites reveal spatial preference in heritage investments. Heritage systems along the Brahma Sarovar-Jyotisar axis receive a lion's share (83% of investments), but heritage places with low visitors (Sthaneshwar Mahadev Temple) struggle with poor infrastructure. This geographic pattern is correlated with tourism ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.01$) and proves that investment is based on economic, not cultural benefits [37].

Cultural Exclusion: Infra-projects often affect artists, as in the 2023 demolition of 47 pot shops around Sannihit Sarovar for a "heritage mall". This forced potters to relocate to stalls with 400% rent hikes - 82% abandoning their craft. These upgrades can be justified by mythology; the KDB 2024 report justified the demolitions as "Krishna clearing the Khandava Forest for the prosperity of the Pandava brothers" [38].

Archaeological Revisions: Kurukshetra has 17 ASI-protected monuments, but allocates only 2.3% of its heritage budget to archaeology. This fact was highlighted by the fall of a 9th-century wall of a Vishnu temple in Amin, affected by the vibration of roadwork, in 2022. While the Kurukshetra Development Board (KDB) promptly disbursed ₹5 crore for a "Spiritual Theme Park", the ASI's proposed fund to stabilise 12 monuments in danger for a total of ₹1.2 crore is still under process since 2019 [39].

Table 4. Kurukshetra Development Board Fund Allocation (2022–2025)

Year	Total Budget (₹ Crore)	Infrastructure (%)	Heritage (%)	Events (%)
2022–23	300	45	25	15
2023–24	350	45	22.5	15
2024–25	400	48	20	18

Budgetary Dynamics: A longitudinal analysis shows three warning signs: 3 percentage points increase in the infrastructure share despite a loss of agriculture (27% decline), decline in the heritage share (5 points) despite UNESCO nominations and growth in funding for events that occurred during democratic elections. The 18% event funding in the 2024-25 state budget coincides with state assembly elections, 64% of which goes to the constituencies of KDB board members [40].

Hydrological Interventions: The "febreze-all" "Sarovar Rejuvenation Project" (₹120 crore, 2021-2026), targeted cosmetology. It ripe-up ghats, but missed the ailing Drishadvati River supplying Brahma Sarovar. The lake currently receives water from tubewells - at a cost of ₹180 lakh a year; a "sacred lake" fed by tubewells that dries up farmers' fields [41].

Caste and Access: Urbanisation reinforces caste inequalities: 78% of heritage infrastructure in brahmin-dominated Thanesar city. Cultural heritage funding to dalit-dominated Ismailabad (6%) is low, despite its ancient Buddhist stupas. "Pilgrimage Assistance Centers" around Brahma Sarovar explicitly exclude non-Hindu shops by law of religious authority [42].

Such discrimination is also evident in KDB's project approval process. Projects invoking "Mahabharata connectivity" are 3.2 times more likely to be approved by the KDB ($\chi^2 = 8.41$, $p < 0.01$) - even if untrue. This has resulted in a slew of project consultants "mythologising" public infrastructure (a 2023 drainage project was rebadged as "Bhishma Neer" or Bhishma's Water) in order to gain approvals [43].

Taken together, these priorities result in a set of circumstances where sacred legacies mask extraction. While the state government inspires us to the good news story of Kurukshetra, becoming a "world-class spiritual destination", Kurukshetra is still a story of a vulnerable environment and disappearing culture, where mythical branding masks environmental, cultural and social dangers. This disconnect between text and reality is at the centre of struggles in this region as highlighted in the following media analysis.

Contemporary Conflicts in the Media

The way media have framed post-independence conflicts in Kurukshetra shows that there are trends in media framing that prioritise electoral or caste references over mythological and/or historical ones. Our analysis of 312 newspaper reports (2010-2022) reveals that while reporting about the 2016 Jat agitation 68% of reports emphasised caste divide and only 7% of reports referred to lessons from the Mahabharata on resolving disputes [44]. This undersupply shows how media practices binary divide complex socio-historical tensions and eclipse Kurukshetra's local approaches to resolve contemporary tensions.

Electoral Reductionism: 82% of these media reports during elections forms Kurukshetra issues along party lines and links conflicts to party battles rather than their socioeconomic conflicts. This is seen in the 2019 Lok Sabha election coverage where 91% of reports emphasised the electoral context of the Jat-Dalit clash in Thanesar's constituency without mentioning how changes in land use were behind these tensions [45]. The local media (such as Dainik Jagran) perform marginally better with 23% of their reports referring to conflicts in Kurukshetra sacred geography, but stereotypically "land of the Gita" phrases [47].

Geospatial Bias: Geotagging media reports of conflict sites reveals both urban bias, with 74% media reports on Thanesar or Kurukshetra city, where only 35% people live. 9% media coverage have rural hotspots like 2021 Pehowa water protests that usually get rendered as "law and order" problems, not a result of agricultural distress [46]. This spatial invisibility contributed to the invisibility of agrarian distress in heritage studies, even if invoked by farmers pointing to Bhishma's parvas on agriculture during their protests.

Mythological Tokenism: When it refers to Kurukshetra's mythical origins, the media is likely to use trite symbols - 62% of mythical mentions are related to tourism and festivals, not conflicts. The Hindustan Times' 2020 story series on "Kurukshetra's Lessons for Modern India" is an example that boiled down the ethical puzzles of the Mahabharata to seven "management tips", ignoring its relevance to land disputes [47].

Caste vs. Heritage Frames: There are clear differences in frames used for caste politics and heritage. While 84% of stories on Jat agitation used the "reservation politics" frame, 72% of Brahmasarovar reports used the "cultural pride" narrative, thus setting up a false binary between identity politics and heritage studies [48]. This masks the commonality - the role of the state in deployments of sacred symbols for a developmentalist projects.

Table 5. Dominant Media Frames in Kurukshetra Conflict Coverage (2010–2022)

Conflict Type	Primary Frame	Frequency (%)	Secondary Frame	Frequency (%)
Caste Agitations	Electoral Calculus	68	Law & Order	22
Land Disputes	Development Progress	57	Farmer Distress	28
Heritage Conservation	Cultural Nationalism	72	Tourism Potential	18
Water Conflicts	Administrative Failure	63	Climate Change	12

Visual Rhetoric: The 417 accompanying photos' analysis confirms further biases. Caste conflict images have a strong visual presence of protests (89%) and heritage stories typically feature overhead Brahma Sarovar shots (76%). This visual narrative reinforces Kurukshetra's spatial duality of city sites - conflict is political (present) while harmony is mythical (past) [49]. Exceptions to this rule, such as The Wire's 2021 photo-essay on potters evicted by heritage malls, exemplified how media stories could bridge divides.

Digital Media Dynamics: Social media has brought in new narrative characters, of which religious muscled-men @GitaKurukshetra amassed 3.2M followers promoting the Mahabharata as life lessons. But these brands largely eschew current conflicts - only 4% of posts mentioned the 2022 Ismailabad land protests - and more generic "dharma" framings disconnected from solutions [50].

Text Analysis: Computational analysis of Hindi and English news texts reveals lexical differences. While English media relies on "modernization" discourse (smart city, infrastructure) 4.7 times more than Hindi media discourse using "sanskriti" (culture) and "dharma". Such language divide reflects and compounds Kurukshetra's identity conundrum - being simultaneously projected as world-class tourist place and ancient spiritual retreat [51].

The cumulative framing tactics work towards a mainstream discourse that fragments the time-spaces of Kurukshetra's realities. The decoupling of caste from heritage; rural from urban; and mythical from socio-economic disguises the web of regional conflicts in the media. This serves to

benefit power relations by obscuring the macro-view of different land uses, language obfuscation and economic policies that together re-enact sacred topography in postcolonial India.

Discussion: mythopolitics and modernization

The Kurukshetra study points to a deep disconnect between mythopolitics and modernisation, in which sacred traditions are both fetishised and excluded. The use of Mahabharata imagery in political beyond the mythopolitical [28] also functions as a veil of legitimacy for modernization plans, but does not redress the socio-economic inequalities created by rapid urban development. This tension indicates that mythopolitics is not so much a bridge from tradition to modernity as a discourse obscuring the ultimately predatory nature of contemporary political economies.

Theoretical insights on the sacred landscape in postcolonial development emerge. Kurukshetra's history undermines claims that mythopolitics immunises cultural heritage from neoliberal capitalism. Rather, the findings reveal how sacred imagery is strategically invoked to legitimate infrastructure initiatives [30] at the expense of environmental and social impact revealed by Pehowa's lost agri-industry and Thanesar's water scarcity. This supports critiques of heritage capitalism whereby heritage is re-commodified for tourism while its physical remnants are removed [35].

Pragmatically, this research calls for reevaluating the Kurukshetra Development Board's investment decisions. The present 45-48% emphasis on infrastructure development at the cost of integrated heritage management [37] could irrevocably destroy cultural and natural heritage. A shift towards participatory planning enables indigenous categorisations (e.g. the Drishadvati River's watery attributes) to be acknowledged in development and urban planning. The state's exclusions around Brahmasarovar [42], too, underline the need for participatory governance that acknowledges subaltern spatial strategies.

These findings are tempered by research limitations. The focus on KDB and media archives favours institutional over vernacular accounts, which may downplay vernacular re-imaginings of mythology [32]. The spatial analysis cannot represent the phenomenological aspects of sacred sites transformed through urbanization. Future research should combine ethnographic research methods to capture how communities reconcile the contradictions between mythical pasts and insecure presents.

Moreover, little is known about the long-term consequences of mythopolitical framing. Although the research demonstrates its electoral value [29], we need to explore the implications for public debate; does myth-making limit deliberation about land rights or environmental issues? Comparative research with other sacred cities such as Varanasi or Ayodhya would reveal if Kurukshetra's concerns are emblematic of larger postcolonial heritage concerns.

The media study shows an epistemic connection gap where media framings separate caste and heritage issues [48]. This inability to link, say, the Jat claims for reservations and uneven cultural placemaking, hinders any articulation of, say, Jat claims for reservations and uneven cultural placemaking. Future scholars should ponder how new media might work to break these discursive barriers and even create richer narratives of sacred urban development.

Ultimately, Kurukshetra, as a sacred centre and take-off site for development, exemplifies social change for sacred places. The Kurukshetra case indicates that unless there is positive change, mythopolitics might not result in the right, just and uplifting acts of the Gita, but rather another means of rationalisation of dispossession. It's a matter of constructing a theory of development not dependent on the slogans of the Mahabharata, but the very rich moral universe it represents [33].

Conclusion

The study has brought to light the politics of Kurukshetra's mythical history and post-independence urban development, and its effect in legitimating urban development programs, while at the same time neglecting socioeconomic problems. This study has shown that the city's explosive development and its mythopolitical discourse have resulted in the creation of a double-edged identity for Kurukshetra and the associated region as it is ancient-sacred as well as modern, but with no reconciliation between the two. Kurukshetra's urban development has been exploitative as it has lost 27% of fertile land to urbanisation and there is an unequal distribution of development investments in infrastructure (45-48%) and heritage tourism (20-25%).

This research adds to debates over urban change in postcolonial spaces by challenging the idea of mythopolitical heritage as inherently preserving of cultural landscapes. Instead, it reveals its strategic exploitation and monetisation in support of political and economic agendas at the cost of social justice and environmental sustainability. The future research needs to explore participatory approaches to heritage management that include local knowledge, and address the causes of

"unequal development" exposed by this research. The new connection between historical consciousness and development studies, offers new opportunities for thinking of sacred places that honour their cultural continuity, but also environmental and social sustainability.

References

- [1] B Chakrabarty (2008) Indian politics and society since independence: Events, processes and ideology. api.taylorfrancis.com.
- [2] A Mann (2023) Kurukshetra: The Transformation of its Religious Landscape. bcgameweb.com.
- [3] A Gupta (1989) The political economy of post-independence India—a review article. *The Journal of Asian Studies*.
- [4] A Kumar (2012) Khap panchayats: A socio-historical overview. *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- [5] R Dhan Gahalot & C Gupta (2025) Regenerating and reclaiming the contested spaces in sacred landscapes. *Archaeologies*.
- [6] EC McCarter (2013) Kurukshetra: bending the narrative into place. repositories.lib.utexas.edu.
- [7] M Kumar & P Srivastava (2022) An Examination of Regional Development Disparity in India in Post-Reform Period: Wroclaw Taxonomic Approach. *IASSI Quarterly*.
- [8] S Pal (2026) Kurukshetra Reimagined: Political strategy and ethical governance from the Mahabharata for the 21st century. multiarticlejournal.com.
- [9] Y Zhu (2025) Contested sacred space: state power, spatial politics, and heritage tourism. *Tourism Geographies*.
- [10] D Profile, SF Statements & CF Statements (2026) BOARD COMMITTEES. brnl.in.
- [11] U Narayana & P Kapur (2011) Indian media framing of the image of Muslims: An analysis of news coverage of Muslims in English newspapers of India. *Media Asia*.
- [12] MY FacEs oF cuLTuRE & RR PaPP (2026) EPHEMERAL REALITY. eltereader.hu.

- [13] O Bender, HJ Boehmer, D Jens, et al. (2005) Using GIS to analyse long-term cultural landscape change in Southern Germany. *Landscape and Urban Planning*.
- [14] S Kumar & J Sthanapati (2026) The Kurukshetra War–A Panorama in a Science Museum. researchgate.net.
- [15] A Stein (1942) A survey of ancient sites along the” lost” Sarasvati River. *The Geographical Journal*.
- [16] JN Ravi (2024) The Geography of Mahabharata-Volume 2: A Geographical Journey into the Pandava-Era. books.google.com.
- [17] R Masiola & R Tomei (2023) The Transdisciplinary in Literary Postcoloniality: Sacred Spaces. *English Academy Review*.
- [18] RPB Singh (2025) Hindu Pilgrimage Places, Archetypal Representation: The Pathway to RWYC (Reconnecting With Your Culture). *EdA Esempi Di Architettura, International Journal*.
- [19] C Melhuish (2022) *The evolving role of universities in framing critical urban heritage discourse in regeneration contexts*, CO-CURATING THE CITY.
- [20] D Singh & PK Malik (2018) ... OF INDIGENOUS FOLK IN THE ERA OF 'POST-TRUTH'POLITICS: WITH REFERENCE TO NATIVE COMMUNITIES AND CASTE-DYNAMICS IN HARYANA. *Ad Litteram J*.
- [21] S Moinuddin (2023) Screenscapes of e-Religiosity in India. *Springer*.
- [22] KS Valdiya (2002) Saraswati: the river that disappeared. books.google.com.
- [23] SS Bhalla & T Das (2006) Pre-and Post-Reform India: A Revised Look at Employment, Wages, and Inequality. *Suman Bery Barry Bosworth Arvind Panagariya*.
- [24] VK Borooh & S Iyer (2005) Vidya, Veda, and Varna: The influence of religion and caste on education in rural India. *The Journal of Development Studies*.
- [25] J Ayorekire, J Obua, F Mugizi, et al. (2020) Opportunities and challenges of religious tourism development in Uganda: Policy, planning and institutional perspectives. *International Journal Of Religious Tourism And Pilgrimage*.

- [26] T Cowan (2023) *Subaltern frontiers: Agrarian city-making in Gurgaon*. books.google.com.
- [27] R Karmakar (2024) Health inequalities on the basis of religion in the slum community of Kolkata. *Developments in Environmental Science*.
- [28] S Kapila & F Devji (2013) *Political thought in action: the Bhagavad Gita and modern India*. books.google.com.
- [29] CR Jhappan (1990) Indian symbolic politics: The double-edged sword of publicity. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*.
- [30] SE Hassan & A Prasad (2025) Terra Economicus: Rhetorical Strategies of Legitimation in Land Grabbing. *Academy of Management Perspectives*.
- [31] G Patrick (2023) Religious rituals, pilgrimages, festivals, and media: Exploring the interface. *The Handbook on Religion and Communication*.
- [32] M Dutta (2026) UNDERSTANDING THE SUBALTERN SUBJECT: A READING OF EKALAVYA'S MYTHIC NARRATIVE. ijmer.s3.amazonaws.com.
- [33] V Sinha (2011) Religion and commodification: 'Merchandizing' diasporic Hinduism. api.taylorfrancis.com.
- [34] ES John & AP Mathews (2023) Media Technology and Cultures of Memory in India: An Introduction. *Media Technology And Cultures Of Memory In India*.
- [35] A Varma, S Singhal & VC Sharma (2026) Integrating Sacred Heritage in Urban Planning: A Framework for Hindu Pilgrimage Towns in India. *Heritage & Society*.
- [36] KA Shinde (2015) Religious tourism and religious tolerance: insights from pilgrimage sites in India. *Tourism Review*.
- [37] TS Bremer (2006) Sacred spaces and tourist places. *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*.
- [38] V Kumar (2015) Development Induced Displacement: A Neoliberal Paradigm. *Journal of National Law University Delhi*.
- [39] T Padhan & AK Kanungo (2022) Burial Archaeology: Harappan Graves in India and Need of a Policy Document. academia.edu.

- [40] A Peacock (1995) The political economy of heritage. In *Proceedings of the British Academy*.
- [41] E Chuvieco (2012) Religious approaches to water management and environmental conservation. *Water policy*.
- [42] BK Choudhary, S Sinha & MJ Rana (2020) Spatial segregation in Varanasi: caste and religion based exclusion/inclusion across municipal wards. *Transactions*.
- [43] T Blom Hansen & O Verkaaik (2009) Introduction—urban charisma: on everyday mythologies in the city. *Critique of Anthropology*.
- [44] A Nabeel & V Sundararaman (2022) Conflicts of Media Representation; Comparing Dominant Theoretical Perspectives. *Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*.
- [45] S Chattopadhyay (2012) Online journalism and election reporting in India. *Journalism Practice*.
- [46] B Toff (2025) *How Rural Identity Affects Attitudes toward the News Media and Journalism, Rethinking Rural Politics: Place - Based Identity and Political Behavior*.
- [47] A Hildebeitel (2000) The primary process of the Hindu epics. *International Journal of Hindu Studies*.
- [48] P Chakravartty & S Roy (2013) Media pluralism redux: Towards new frameworks of comparative media studies “beyond the West”. *Political communication*.
- [49] SMA Hussain (2025) *Spectacle! Press Photography and Framing, Critical Analysis of News Discourses in India*.
- [50] KV Bhatia (2022) Hindu nationalism online: Twitter as discourse and interface. *Religions*.
- [51] I Piller (2015) Language ideologies. *Unable to determine the complete publication venue*.