



Research Article

Psychological Perceptions of The Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor Among Varanasi's Creative Class: A Hermeneutic Inquiry

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Abstract

The Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor (KVDC) has changed Varanasi not only as a built environment, but also as a lived cultural landscape. Since its inauguration, public discussion has largely revolved around measurable achievements: higher visitor footfall, improved access to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, wider circulation routes, and increased tourism-linked economic activity. These indicators show a unidimensional result of this change. They do not adequately capture how the city's traditional creative communities experience the corridor psychologically. This study investigates the psychological perceptions of Varanasi's creative practitioners, including handloom textile weavers, Banarasi sari masters, visual artists, devotional sculptors, instrument makers, musicians, and writers. Using qualitative data gathered through in-depth discussions with creative stakeholders, study analysis philosophical hermeneutics to interpret how local creators make meaning of the spatial, economic, and cultural changes associated with the KVDC. The findings show that redevelopment in historic sacred cities cannot be assessed only through numerals, The psychological life of place matters. When interventions weaken the genius loci, they may disbalance the creative dispositions through which living heritage is sustained. The article suggests for a more holistic approach to urban redevelopment, which can integrate infrastructure with artisan well-being, cultural continuity, and the preservation of embodied creative traditions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Varanasi is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. For a long time, it has been a vibrant, living cultural ecosystem (Eck, 1982; UNESCO, n.d.; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2021). The city's identity as Kashi, the "City of Light," is not confined to religious symbolism or monumental heritage. It is also carried in the everyday labour of weavers, sculptors, musicians, woodworkers, metalworkers, writers, ritual specialists, shopkeepers, and neighbourhood-based artisans whose practices give the city its living texture. In Varanasi, culture is not stored only in archives or displayed only at heritage sites; it is produced daily through hands, voices, lanes, sounds, materials, rituals, and inherited forms of attention.

Unlike contemporary industrial cities, where creative production is often separated from domestic life and organized in factories or formal commercial zones, Varanasi's creative economy has historically operated through a decentralized network of residential workspaces known as *karkhanas*. These are embedded within the city's old lanes, or *galis* (Singh, 2007). The *galis* are more than circulation routes. They are social corridors, acoustic chambers, devotional pathways, and memory-bearing spaces. They support a particular mode of creative life in which production, worship, apprenticeship, kinship, trade, and neighborhoods belonging remain closely connected.

For generations now, these spaces have served as a home for specialized creative clusters. It is where handloom weavers produce Banarasi silk saris, and where metal and wood artisans craft sacred objects. It's a place of musicians and instrument makers preserving classical traditions, right alongside the literary practitioners contributing to the devotional and regional imagination of the city. (Chauhan, 2022; District Varanasi, 2026; UNESCO, n.d.). The creative economy of Varanasi, therefore, cannot be understood simply as a set of occupations. It is a cultural ecology. Its vitality depends on the relationship between craft and place, between economic labour and sacred geography, between individual skill and inherited atmosphere.

The inauguration of the Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor marked a major intervention into this older urban ecology. To get the corridor or *mandir* expansion policy to be moving, it involved the acquisition and demolition of more than 300 properties surrounding the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. The driving force behind it all was the stated objective of easing congestion and improving pilgrim movement. (Pati & Husain, 2023; Press Information Bureau, 2021). The temple's public-facing complex expanded from approximately 3,000 square feet to about 500,000 square feet, while a direct route was created between the Ganga River and the temple precinct (Kashi Official Web Portal, n.d.; Press Information Bureau, 2021).

In the Public discourse, the KVDC has been described as a major infrastructural success. Government document and media reports have emphasized increase in tourist arrivals, enhanced accessibility, and the growth of economic activity in and around the shrine proximity (Dikshit, 2025; Singh, 2026). However, they tend to privilege what can be counted: visitors, revenue, area, movement, visibility, and commercial expansion. What remains less visible is the interior experience of those who

inhabit Varanasi not as tourists or administrators, but as creative practitioners whose work depends on subtle environmental conditions.

This distinction is crucial. Research in environmental psychology and cultural geography has shown that place attachment, environmental continuity, and meaningful physical surroundings shape identity, emotional security, and everyday practice (Proshansky et al., 1983; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). For the artisans, these changes aren't abstract at all. A familiar lane, a shrine glimpsed from a workshop, the steady rhythm of temple bells, the crowded energy of a neighborhood, or the deep quiet needed for intricate design work—all of these things become part of the creative process itself. When surroundings like these are suddenly altered, the impact hits deep. It isn't just felt as a physical change, but as a real psychological disturbance.

Existing literature on the KVDC has examined tourism management, heritage conservation, economic growth indicators, displacement, real estate values, and urban infrastructure (Pati & Husain, 2023; Singh, 2007). Yet the psychological experiences of Varanasi's creative class remain unexplored. This gap matters because artisans and cultural practitioners are not marginal to the identity of Varanasi. They are among its principal carriers of living heritage. If their spatial, emotional, and creative worlds are unsettled, then the redevelopment of the city must be evaluated through a more careful interpretive lens.

This paper addresses that gap through a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry into the narratives of creative practitioners.

The primary objective is to answer the following questions: What psychological insights do Varanasi's creative practitioners have regarding the spatial and cultural disruptions caused by the KVDC? Additionally, how do these internal transformations redefine their roles and outputs within the evolving local economy?

1.1. Theoretical Framework & Methodological Orientation

This study adopts philosophical hermeneutics in the tradition of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer to examine the lived and interpreted meanings of spatial transformation in Varanasi. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is well-suited for this study, as the inquiry extends beyond a binary evaluation of whether participants approve or disapprove of the KVDC. Rather, it seeks to understand how they experience, interpret, and emotionally negotiate the redevelopment of a sacred urban environment in relation to their creative lives (Dilthey, 1996; Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 2008).

Hermeneutics inquiry begins with the view that human experience is always situated. People do not live in abstract space; they live in places already shaped by language, memory, history, symbols, bodily routines, and relationships. In this study, the artisan is approached through Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, or "being in the world" (Heidegger, 2008). The artisan's tools, workshop, lane, temple route, customer interactions, and devotional surroundings are not merely external conditions of work. They form part of the artisan's

world, and therefore part of the structure through which creativity becomes possible.

Gadamer's idea of the "fusion of horizons" is equally important (Gadamer, 2004). The researcher does not stand outside the field as a neutral extractor of data. Interpretation emerges through a dialogue between the analytical horizon of the researcher and the historical, emotional, and spiritual horizons of participants. In this sense, the participants' accounts are not treated as raw opinions to be categorized mechanically. They are treated as meaning-bearing narratives that reveal how redevelopment enters the inner life of a community.

The hermeneutic circle provides the analytical structure for this process. Individual statements are interpreted in relation to the broader transformation of Varanasi, while the broader transformation is understood through the specific voices of artisans, musicians, sculptors, and writers. This movement between part and whole is essential because the psychological impact of the KVDC cannot be grasped through isolated quotations alone, nor through macro-level descriptions alone. It becomes visible in the relationship between lived detail and wider urban restructuring.

2. Qualitative Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative research design rooted in phenomenological hermeneutics. The selection of this research design rests on the premise that the specific experiential dimensions investigated—including creative disturbance, place-based attachment, cultural anxiety, artistic autonomy, and survival stress—resist reductionist numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, while quantitative indicators can map the material scale of redevelopment or the expansion of tourism, they are fundamentally limited in their capacity to articulate the internal reality of an artisan estranged from their traditional creative habitat.

The research therefore privileges interpretive depth over statistical generalization. It examines how local artisans and creative practitioners describe their altered relationship with the city, how they understand changes in the moral and cultural atmosphere of Varanasi, and how they negotiate the pressures of a tourism-driven economy. The analysis follows the logic of the hermeneutic circle by moving repeatedly between individual expressions and the larger socio-spatial context of the KVDC (George, 2020).

2.1. Sampling and Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is appropriate when the research requires individuals with direct, first-hand experience of the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2019). The final sample consisted of 17 active stakeholders from Varanasi's traditional creative economy operating near the peripheral zones of the Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor.

The sample included seven master handloom weavers from traditional textile hubs such as Madanpura and Chowk; five devotional artisans involved in brass engraving, sculpture, and

wooden idol fabrication; four traditional musicians, instrument makers, and glass-bead creators; and one independent literary writer and street-level innovator. The purpose of this sampling strategy was not to produce a statistically representative survey of all creative workers in Varanasi. Rather, it was to gather textured accounts from practitioners whose creative lives are closely connected to the city's older cultural geography.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in local dialects of Hindi and Bhojpur. This linguistic choice was methodologically significant. Many of the participants' emotional and cultural meanings are embedded in idioms that do not travel easily into standardized academic English. Speaking in local dialects allowed participants to describe their experiences with greater nuance, especially when discussing spiritual energy, neighbourhood memory, devotion, artistic satisfaction, and cultural loss.

The interviews did not rely on rigid checklists. Instead, open-ended prompts were used to invite reflection on spatial memory, artistic motivation, economic survival, changing tourist behaviour, and the perceived transformation of Varanasi's cultural atmosphere. This allowed participants to move between personal memory, professional experience, moral judgment, and cultural interpretation.

Ethical safeguards were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, participation was voluntary, and anonymity was preserved in the presentation of transcript material (Silverman, 2021). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English through cross-verification so that conceptual meaning could be retained as carefully as possible.

2.3. Data Analysis via the Hermeneutic Circle

The textual dataset was analysed using three phases associated with hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

The first phase is naive reading. The transcripts were read repeatedly in order to understand their overall emotional movement, tonal quality, and narrative rhythm. At this stage, attention was given not only to what participants said, but also to how they framed loss, anxiety, pride, devotion, anger, and resilience.

The second phase is structural thematic analysis. The transcripts were divided into meaning units and coded for recurring experiential patterns. These included spatial alienation, loss of creative stillness, market pressure, intrinsic artistic autonomy, digital dilution, cultural degradation, and the ethical meaning of art.

The third phase is comprehensive interpretation. The coded meaning units were brought back into relation with the wider context of post-KVDC Varanasi. This final stage created a "fusion of horizons," where participant narratives were interpreted alongside concepts from environmental psychology, heritage studies, tourism theory, and hermeneutic phenomenology (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, 2022).

All direct quotes are explicitly drawn from the transcript data to anchor the findings in participants' real experiences.

3. Interpretive Analysis and Findings

Theme 1: Spatial Alienation and the Fracturing of Creative Stillness

The first major theme emerging from the transcripts is spatial alienation. Participants repeatedly described the redevelopment not merely as the widening or clearing of physical space, but as the interruption of an older, more intimate relationship between creative life and sacred geography. What is striking in these accounts is that the loss is not expressed only in terms of property, access, or livelihood. It is expressed through the language of energy, stillness, atmosphere, memory, and visual orientation.

Participant 2 clearly described the emotional loss caused by the removal of neighbourhood landmarks:

"The corridor has broken up the ancient temples which were nestled right in our old lanes... I am sure of one thing: the temples deep inside those lanes contain an immense, irreplaceable spiritual energy (energy)." (Participant 2)

This statement reveals how the older lanes were perceived by local creators. They were not simply congested spaces awaiting rationalization through modern planning. They were understood as sites of accumulated sacred presence. The word "energy" is especially revealing because it points to a kind of embodied and affective knowledge that may not be visible in architectural plans or administrative reports. For the participant, what has been disturbed is not only a set of structures, but a felt spiritual ecology.

This sense of displacement is also linked to the visual reorganization of the sacred landscape.

Participant 12 thought the changes in the visual were bad.

"Hate the design of the KVDC... The historic temple spires (shikhar) have been covered up and hidden behind these new modern structures. For us, the spiritual importance of catching a glimpse of the temple spire far exceeds the importance of interacting with the institutionalised space inside." (Participant 12)

The comment is not only an aesthetic objection. It shows that sacred orientation in Varanasi has historically depended on partial views, glimpses, thresholds, and intimate visual encounters. The shikhar operates here as a spiritual marker that organizes the participant's relationship to place. When it is hidden behind new structures, the loss is not merely visual. It is interpretive and emotional. The participant contrasts the lived force of a glimpse with the impersonal quality of "institutionalized space," suggesting that access and meaning are not the same thing.

Participant 15 extends this critique by questioning the assumption that architectural expansion is equivalent to cultural improvement:

"Size does not equal artistic quality...just making a courtyard bigger (praangad bada karna) is not a great artistic achievement. In the process of this construction a great many of our historic, sacred idols were utterly broken and destroyed. An

artist is engrossed in his deep work (kaam mein leen) in silence, but this structural disturbance disturbs that stability." (Participant 15)

This statement is analytically important because it challenges the developmental logic of scale. Larger space may serve crowd management, but it does not automatically produce cultural depth. The participant's emphasis on silence and stability draws attention to the psychological conditions of artistic labour. For many creative practitioners, the environment is not a neutral backdrop. It is part of the discipline of work. Disturbance in the environment becomes disturbance in attention.

Participant 3 described this challenge as

"The shift from an intimate space to a busy, open, high-traffic space was abrupt and made it difficult for artists to stay focused on the complex traditional designs. The real art is what you capture on canvas when you look deeply at your immediate surroundings... But online exhibits or modern open spaces cannot recreate that emotional atmosphere (emotions ka vaatavaran)." (Participant 3)

Here, the connection between perception and production becomes explicit. Complex traditional design depends on deep looking, and deep looking requires a particular emotional atmosphere. The participant's phrase "emotions ka vaatavaran" is significant because it locates creativity in a surrounding mood or affective environment. This is not a romantic claim alone; it points to the cognitive ecology of artistic work. Attention, memory, atmosphere, and craft are intertwined.

3.1 Hermeneutic Dialogue & Theoretical Synthesis

It suggests that the KVDC has produced a rupture in the relationship between place and creative subjectivity. The participants are not simply lamenting the past, nor are they rejecting all change. Rather, they are identifying a specific loss: the weakening of those environmental conditions through which creativity, devotion, and belonging had been held together.

This experience can be understood through Fullilove's concept of "root shock," which refers to the psychological disruption caused when familiar neighborhoods ecologies are torn apart (Fullilove, 2004). In Varanasi, the galis were not only residential or commercial spaces. They were affective infrastructures. They carried social familiarity, sacred memory, acoustic intimacy, and craft-based routines. Their transformation therefore affects not only movement through the city, but also the inner orientation of those who create within it. The findings also resonate with place-identity and place-attachment frameworks (Proshansky et al., 1983; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). The participants' distress emerges from the destabilization of environments that had contributed to their sense of self. In this context, the artisan's workshop should not be understood as equivalent to a production unit in an industrial zone. It is closer to a situated creative sanctuary, embedded within a sacred and social landscape.

Participant 12's concern about the hidden shikhar offers a powerful architectural metaphor. A vertical marker of sacred

continuity has been obscured by newer structures associated with institutional management and tourist circulation. The artist remains in Varanasi, yet the city's older symbolic coordinates have shifted. This is the condition of spatial alienation: presence without full belonging, access without intimacy, visibility without atmosphere. The idea of genius loci is useful here because it helps explain why the loss of place-spirit can become a loss of creative grounding (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

Theme 2: The Psychological Friction of Mass Tourism vs. Intrinsic Artistic Autonomy

The second theme concerns the tension between the fast-moving economy of mass tourism and the slower, more internally regulated rhythm of traditional creative production. Participants do not deny that tourism has brought economic activity to the area. Their concern is more specific: the new economy appears to reward speed, low price, display value, and quick consumption, whereas traditional craft depends on time, patience, embodied skill, and a sustained relationship between maker and patron.

Participant 4 noted how intense crowding could diminish the city's identity, saying:

"If you have constant, extreme crowding like this, people will start to think of Varanasi as just a chaotic, overcrowded city... Our local culture is rapidly transitioning into a fast-moving tourist zone and it creates a difficult environment." (Participant 4).

The phrase "fast-moving tourist zone" captures a major shift in the lived character of the city. Varanasi is not merely receiving more visitors; it is being experienced through a different tempo. This matters because creative traditions often depend on slow forms of attention. When the city is increasingly organized around crowd flow and quick tourist consumption, the temporal rhythm of craft begins to feel out of place.

Participant 11 described the financial pressure that compels creators to abandon heritage crafts for mass-market goods:

"We have the ability to keep making complex traditional handmade toys, but it just does not provide enough income to survive... If we switch to mass utility items like Sindooranis (vermillion boxes), we will earn much more reliably." (Participant 11).

This statement reveals the painful gap between skill and survival. The participant does not lack technical capacity or cultural knowledge. The problem is that the market no longer adequately supports the labour-intensive form of that knowledge. Complex traditional craft becomes economically risky, while simpler utility goods offer greater reliability. The psychological pressure lies precisely in this forced recalibration of value.

Participant 13 noted the widening financial gap:

"The businesses that are hit by this great tourist rush are doing very well. But for those whose businesses are floundering under these new dynamics, the system needs to pay attention... We are forced to borrow just to stay alive. When you're knocked down by a sudden shift, you have to fight to get back up with what's left." (Participant 13)

This testimony complicates the general narrative of tourism-led prosperity. Increased visitor flow may produce visible economic growth, but the distribution of benefits is uneven. Some enterprises are positioned to capture the gains, while others are pushed into vulnerability. For smaller creative practitioners, the new urban economy can produce a sense of abandonment: the city celebrates heritage publicly, but the bearers of that heritage may be left to absorb the risks privately. Yet the participants' responses are not only marked by anxiety. They also contain strong claims of artistic selfhood. Participant 14 fully refused to produce for the market, underlining that real art is driven by an inner emotional connection:

"I don't paint to satisfy the market; I paint for my own heart (dil ke liye)... I even mix my paints with the holy waters of Ganga itself. Shiva is in our creative visions and this completes my art. It's about self-directed work." (Participant 14)

The insistence on "self-directed work" is significant. It shows that artistic autonomy is not an abstract principle for the participant; it is a mode of psychological survival. The use of Ganga water in the artistic process further demonstrates that the work is embedded in sacred materiality. The market may demand objects, but the artist understands the act of making as devotion, emotion, and self-relation.

Participant 15 agreed, adding that comparing yourself and chasing trends can stall your growth as a creator:

"True art gives us a lot of internal satisfaction (santoshti)... If we spend all our lives looking at and copying what other people are doing, we will never be able to do anything original of our own." (Participant 15)

This statement shifts the discussion from economic pressure to creative interiority. The participant identifies originality as a product of inner satisfaction rather than external imitation. In doing so, the artisan defends a moral psychology of craft: true work must arise from within, not from the compulsions of trend or market comparison.

Participant 5 stressed that their tribute to local history was out of respect, not profit:

"When we were asked to design the statues of our historic freedom fighters, we simply refused to use a cold, corporate business wala dimag." (Participant 5)

Participant 1 also mentioned that sustainable creative evolution should not be driven by commercial mandates from the top down, but rather an internal change of perspective:

"The textile craftsmanship of Banaras is simply incomparable... But our collective consciousness must rise (soch uthegi) if we are to see any real, lasting change in our economy." (Participant 1).

Together, these statements indicate that participants distinguish between earning a livelihood and reducing art to commercial calculation. They do not romanticize poverty, but they resist the idea that market logic should become the final authority over creative practice.

3.2 Hermeneutic Dialogue & Theoretical Synthesis

The testimonies point to a conflict between two economies of value. One is the economy of mass tourism, organized around volume, speed, visibility, and purchase. The other is the economy of traditional craft, organized around time, devotion, skill, memory, and relational exchange. The KVDC has strengthened the first economy, but the participants' narratives show that the second remains psychologically and culturally central to Varanasi's creative class.

This conflict is clearly expressed in Participant 11's statement:

"As an artist, I am between the two extremes. If I keep going with my traditional craft, I will suffer financially, but if I switch over to mass-produced utility goods, I will be financially sound but I will feel dissatisfied artistically." (Participant 11)

The importance of this statement lies in its refusal of an easy solution. The artisan cannot simply choose tradition without economic cost, nor can they choose mass production without inner dissatisfaction. This is not merely a business dilemma. It is a psychological split between survival and self-respect.

Tourism theory helps interpret this condition. The shift toward easily consumable heritage products reflects broader processes of commodification and staged authenticity (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). When heritage spaces are reorganized around tourist demand, local cultural production may be simplified, accelerated, or made more display-oriented. From the perspective of self-determination theory, such pressures threaten autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are central to psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

At the same time, the participants' insistence on devotion, originality, and self-directed work shows that creative agency persists. Artisans are not merely being acted upon by redevelopment. They are interpreting it, resisting it, adapting to it, and morally evaluating it. Their responses show that the creative class of Varanasi possesses not only technical skill, but also an ethical vocabulary through which it judges the changing city.

Theme 3: Existential Distress over Cultural Degradation and Digital Dilution

The third theme concerns anxiety over cultural degradation, digital mediation, and the transformation of sacred traditions into consumable spectacle. Participants repeatedly described a

shift in the way visitors engage with Varanasi. Their concern is not simply that tourists take photographs or that online commerce exists. Rather, they worry that sacred and artistic practices are increasingly being detached from reverence, embodied presence, empathy, and depth.

Participant 12 explained how the commodification of sacred rituals as casual digital content diminishes their emotional and experiential value, noting a lack of empathy in modern tourist behaviour:

"... watching our sacred celebrations like the Shiv Barat on a phone screen absolutely kills the visceral energy of being there in the moment... Look at what is happening at the sacred cremation grounds of Manikarnika Ghat. Families are weeping over their dead while tourists shamelessly stand around recording videos for social media." (Participant 12)

This account moves beyond a general critique of technology. It points to a perceived ethical failure in contemporary spectatorship. The sacred and the intimate are being transformed into recordable content. The participant's discomfort emerges from the collision between grief and performance, ritual and display, presence and mediation. The problem is not the phone as an object, but the attitude it enables when used without sensitivity.

Participant 15 also expressed a similar concern about the growth of digital marketplaces, noting that online transactions lack the tactile, authentic connection that creates long-lasting relationships between creators and patrons:

"The physical quality of products sold on online platforms falls massively... "Online customers drift away all the time, but when a patron visits your physical shop, they form a lasting, loyal relationship." (Participant 15)

This statement brings the discussion of digitalization into the domain of craft economy. For the participant, the physical shop is not merely a retail site. It is a relational space where trust, loyalty, touch, conversation, and reputation develop over time. Online exchange, by contrast, is experienced as unstable and impersonal. It weakens the human relationship through which craft has traditionally circulated.

Participant 17 delivered an acerbic critique of the crassness of contemporary regional media, arguing that true art must be rooted in empathy and emotional depth:

"Our modern stories are going in a direction they should not go... The rising vulgarity in modern commercial Bhojpuri media is the most destructive element for our society. A song without sahitya (literary depth) is not art... Unless a writer can share and feel deeply the sorrows of others, he cannot exist." (Participant 17)

Participant 17 This focus on creating art as a shared expression of empathy and devotion is further emphasized by the local musicians.

The statement frames art as an ethical and emotional practice. The participant's emphasis on sahitya suggests that artistic form without literary or moral depth is incomplete. The critique of

vulgarity is therefore not only a matter of taste. It reflects a concern that commercial media may erode the capacity of art to cultivate empathy, restraint, and shared feeling.

Participant 16 emphasized that traditional music is a universal spiritual language, not merely a commercial product:

"All artists are inherently filled with a spirit of Bhakti-bhav, deep devotion. We are the silent worshippers of a single supreme truth and that is music." (Participant 16)

Participant 9 agreed, saying that creative mastery is impossible without real reverence; it is still connected with traditional respect for the teacher (Guru):

"True music requires deep devotion and reverence (shraddha)... 'Our traditions are so sacred that we do not say the name of our Guru aloud without immediately asking for forgiveness.'" (Participant 9)

Finally, Participant 7 reminded that art must always serve a larger human welfare to retain its value, even as change is inevitable:

"Change is the law of nature (parivartan prakriti ka niyam hai) ... But our art expressions must always be kalyankari i.e. for welfare of human beings and must always be based on the classical Indian art philosophy." (Participant 7)

3.3 Hermeneutic Dialogue & Theoretical Synthesis

Taken together, these statements reveal that participants understand cultural erosion as a loss of depth in modes of engagement. The city may still attract visitors, rituals may still be performed, music may still be heard, and craft objects may still be bought. Yet participants fear that the inner orientation required to receive these traditions properly—reverence, patience, empathy, apprenticeship, and attentiveness—is being weakened.

This is an existential concern because it touches the question of what makes a tradition alive. Living heritage cannot be reduced to visibility. A ritual that becomes spectacle, a craft that becomes a disposable souvenir, or a song that loses sahitya may remain externally recognizable while becoming internally impoverished. Participants are therefore not merely asking for preservation of objects or monuments. They are asking for preservation of the conditions under which cultural meaning can be felt, transmitted, and respected.

The theme aligns with heritage-tourism research that warns against the commodification of cultural practices and the dominance of staged authenticity in tourist settings (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973). It also extends that discussion by showing how local creators experience commodification psychologically. For them, cultural dilution is not an abstract theoretical process. It appears in the tourist recording grief at Manikarnika, in the online buyer who does not build loyalty, in the vulgarized song without sahitya, and in the weakening of reverence toward Guru and tradition.

4. DISCUSSION: THE HERMENEUTIC SYNTHESIS

4.1. The Convergence of Spatial and Psychological Restructuring

The hermeneutic synthesis of the findings suggests that the KVDC has produced a dual restructuring: one spatial and visible, the other psychological and less easily measured. The spatial restructuring is evident in widened access, cleared zones, expanded temple premises, and increased tourist circulation. The psychological restructuring appears in the participants' altered relationship with place, work, memory, and cultural purpose.

Macro-level accounts of the KVDC emphasize increased footfall, tourism revenue, and infrastructural success (Dikshit, 2025; Pati & Husain, 2023; Singh, 2026). These accounts are important, but they do not exhaust the meaning of redevelopment. For Varanasi's creative class, the city is not only a destination or a site of circulation. It is a field of attention. Its lanes, shrines, workshops, sounds, shadows, and human relationships help organize creative perception.

The participants' narratives show that artistic work is deeply place-dependent. A weaver, sculptor, musician, or writer does not create in isolation from surroundings. Creative practice is shaped by the density of neighbourhood life, the rhythms of devotion, the memory of older spaces, and the trust built through face-to-face interaction. When redevelopment alters these conditions, it changes not only the physical city but also the affective and cognitive conditions of creativity.

This finding supports place-identity and place-attachment frameworks in environmental psychology (Proshansky et al., 1983; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). It also suggests that these frameworks should be extended more explicitly to creative labour in sacred cities. In Varanasi, place attachment is not only residential or emotional; it is productive. It sustains the making of saris, idols, music, stories, paintings, and devotional objects. When place attachment is disturbed, creative output may continue, but its psychological grounding may become fragile.

4.2. Navigating the Commercial Pressures of Mass Tourism

The findings also reveal that tourism-led development produces uneven effects within the creative economy. Increased visitor numbers may benefit some businesses, but they do not automatically strengthen traditional craft systems. On the contrary, mass tourism may intensify demand for quick, inexpensive, and standardized goods, thereby pressuring artisans to abandon complex and time-intensive work.

This pressure creates a distinctive psychological dilemma. Artisans must remain economically viable, yet they also seek to preserve artistic integrity. The resulting tension is not simply between tradition and modernity. It is between different ways of valuing labour. The tourist market often values immediacy and affordability; the artisan values time, skill, devotion, originality, and continuity.

The participants' responses show that many creators resist the reduction of their work to market utility. They articulate a language of inner satisfaction, devotion, reverence, and collective consciousness. This does not mean they are indifferent to income. Rather, it means that income alone cannot define the worth of their practice. Their resilience lies in

their ability to preserve meaning even under conditions of economic pressure.

At the policy level, this distinction is crucial. A city may promote its heritage economy while unintentionally weakening the people who produce that heritage. If tourism development does not include mechanisms for protecting traditional practitioners, then cultural identity may be commercially displayed while the creative class itself becomes increasingly precarious.

4.3 Cultural Continuity and the Ethics of Attention

The concern over digital dilution and cultural degradation introduces another dimension of the study: the ethics of attention. Participants repeatedly suggest that Varanasi's traditions require a certain way of seeing, listening, touching, and participating. Sacred rituals require reverence. Music requires shraddha. Craft requires tactile relation and trust. Literature requires sahitya and empathy. Art requires kalyankari orientation toward human welfare.

These values are difficult to quantify, but they are central to the survival of living heritage. The participants' critique of digital recording, vulgarized media, and impersonal online commerce is therefore not a rejection of change itself. It is a critique of forms of change that weaken the depth of human engagement.

This has implications for heritage policy. Preservation cannot be limited to conserving monuments or improving tourist access. It must also protect the social and psychological conditions through which traditions are meaningfully practiced. Without such protection, heritage risks becoming visually amplified but experientially thinned.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

This research indicates that physical, administrative and economic indicators are not sufficient in the evaluation of mega-infrastructure projects in mediaeval sacred cities. The Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor has really helped in better movement of pilgrims and tourism. But it also brings with it some serious psychological consequences for the local creative practitioners. Impacts include spatial estrangement from historic sites, antagonism between tourism and artistic freedom and fears of cultural degradation and public participation with heritage. The report says living legacy depends on active communities and that artisans and artists are vital to Varanasi's cultural identity. Their habitats and autonomy should be preserved, to preserve cultural richness. Hence, urban planning should be holistic with the community's well-being, cultural sustainability and equitable economic participation taking precedence over simple visitor number maximisation.

5.1 Policy Recommendations

Local authorities should identify locations for artisan work spaces near high traffic areas so that handloom weavers and sculptors can work in a quiet environment. Investment in public galleries will enable local artists to directly showcase their work to heritage tourists, building long-term patron relationships. The needs of the local artisan associations will be taken into account in the urban development so that the cultural identity is maintained by supporting the local artisan associations.

Furthermore, slow-craft tourism can shift the focus from quantity to quality, enhancing appreciation for skills like Banarasi weaving, and thus financially supporting independent creators while maintaining artistic integrity.

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