

# *Krishna's Curse in the Age of Global Tourism: Hindu pilgrimage priests and their trade\**

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## Abstract

This article explores the strategies of *pandas* (Hindu pilgrimage priests) in Vrindavan, relating changes in their trade (*pandagiri*) to tourism. These changes are the result of the *pandas*' creative adjustments to shifting travel patterns that affect their market niche. Utilizing audio-recordings of the *pandas*' guided tours, the article first portrays how *pandas* acquire ritual income from pilgrims by 'inspiring' donations of which they get a percentage. While commercial interests and economic conditions have always been crucial in shaping and perpetuating pilgrimage institutions and practices, global tourism has become an increasingly significant factor. *Pandas* all over India modify their services while the traditional exchange model (*jajmani* system) wanes. Changing travel patterns have made the guided tour a crucial component in the operation of Hindu pilgrimage. Vrindavan *pandas* have therefore turned into guides conducting religious sightseeing tours (*darshan yatra*). These tours are core to the new strategy for acquiring ritual income. To secure clients, *pandas* build connections with travel agencies and drivers and, in some cases, establish their own travel agencies that combine priestly and tourism services. The *pandas*' own understandings of their methods and contemporary travel trends further reflect the dynamic interplay between pilgrimage and tourism in India.

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## Introduction

My story begins with a guided tour that took place in early March 2014 through the narrow lanes of Vrindavan, the pilgrimage town dedicated to Krishna. I audio-recorded two versions of the tour led by pilgrimage priests, known as *pandas*.<sup>1</sup> During the tours they told the familiar story of Krishna conquering the dreadful serpent-demon Kaliya, but added a novel element to the standard rendering. In their version, in the aftermath of the encounter Krishna cursed the current age of decay (*kaliyug*), declaring that children will die young while their parents and grandparents will live on. For those familiar with the reputation of *pandas*, it will perhaps not be surprising to know that they also assured the pilgrims<sup>2</sup> that there was a solution to this rather intimidating curse, and that the solution necessarily involved financial contributions. The story of Krishna's curse was cleverly built up to facilitate donations (*dan karvana*), as the *pandas* later explained.

<sup>1</sup> J. G. Lochtefeld, 'Pandas' in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism: Society, Religious Specialists, Religious Traditions, Philosophy*, K. A. Jacobsen (ed.), Brill, Leiden, 2011, pp. 240–4.

<sup>2</sup> In this article I use the term 'pilgrim' for Hindu travellers arriving at pilgrimage sites like Vrindavan to partake in the worship of Hindu gods. The defining criterion in Hindu pilgrimage, as I see it, is arrival and in situ activity rather than mode of travel or the idea of journeying. Much ink has been spilled trying to differentiate the 'tourist' from the 'pilgrim', religiously motivated journeying being a typical key characteristic of the 'true pilgrim' (cf. I. Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*, Routledge, New York, 2012, pp. 8–9). It is true that most encyclopedic definitions of pilgrimage stress the importance of journey ('Pilgrimage' in *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, J. Z. Smith and W. S. Green, Harper, London, 1996, p. 841; L. K. Davidson and D. M. Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage from the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia*, ABC CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2002, p. 478; E. Turner, 'Pilgrimage' in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, L. Jones (ed.), Macmillan/Thompson Gale, Detroit, 2005, pp. 7145–8; F. Hassauer, 'Pilgrimage', in *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, K. von Stuckrad et al., Brill, Leiden/Boston, 2006, pp. 1452–6; C. Olson, *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2010, pp. 173–5; J. Dubisch, 'Pilgrimage' in *Encyclopedia of Global Religion*, M. Jurgensmeyer and W. C. Roof, SAGE, Thousand Oakes, 2012, pp. 991–6). However, the scriptural Hindu pilgrimage tradition has most often highlighted the destination and the rewards attainable there (K. A. Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: Salvific Space*, Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 89, 97). The entries on Hindu pilgrimage in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* and *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism* therefore begin by describing place rather than journey, downplaying the latter, much like the classical Hindu texts on pilgrimage (W. S. Sax, 'Pilgrimage: Hindu pilgrimage' in Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 7168; K. A. Jacobsen, 'Tirtha and tirthyatra: Salvific space and pilgrimage' in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, K. Jacobsen (ed.), Brill, Leiden, 2009, p. 382).

Several studies note that *pandas* are widely considered to be greedy and unscrupulous.<sup>3</sup> David Gladstone writes that ‘*Pandas* generally have a bad reputation with pilgrims, who often perceive them as corrupt, lazy, and greedy’, and then goes on to mention that residents in Pushkar are concerned that *pandas* are too fond of playing cards, gamble, drink, consume cannabis, and womanize.<sup>4</sup> Two researchers independently report on pilgrims writing *pandas* off as ‘sister-fuckers’.<sup>5</sup> To understand the bad repute in which these priests are held we need to understand how *pandas* secure ritual income and clients, the conditions for which have changed considerably over the last century. Historical studies help us to understand how the trade of pilgrimage priests—*pandagiri*—developed and changed from colonial times into the post-independence era and the post-liberalization period. What remains to be accounted for, however, is the growing importance of tourism. To make sense of the guided tour on Krishna’s curse, we must turn our attention to tourism.

In this article I aim to demonstrate that the dynamics of contemporary Hindu pilgrimage means that the institution of pilgrimage priests and their trade have adapted to both changing travel patterns and a context in which tourist stakeholders and practices become increasingly significant. I will argue, therefore, that the tale of Krishna’s curse was told in the age of global tourism. The notion of a global tourism points to (i) an industry,<sup>6</sup> (ii) the

<sup>3</sup> C. J. Fuller, *Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of a South Indian Temple*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 68–9; P. van der Veer, *Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*, Athlone Press, London, 1989, p. 185; J. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 104; A. G. Gold, *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002 [1988], p. 275; D. L. Gladstone, *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour: Travel and Tourism in the Third World*, Routledge, New York, 2005, p. 189; J. G. Lochtefeld, *God’s Gateway: Identity and Meaning in a Hindu Pilgrimage Place*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2010, pp. 131, 134; K. Shinde, ‘Entrepreneurship and indigenous entrepreneurs in religious tourism in India’, *International Journal of Tourism Research*, vol. 12, 2010, p. 529; Lochtefeld, ‘Pandas’, p. 243.

<sup>4</sup> Gladstone, *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour*, p. 189, f. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Gold, *Fruitful Journeys*, p. 275; Gladstone, *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour*, p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> A. Fylann and B. Garrod, ‘From competition to collaboration in the tourism industry’ in *Global Tourism*, W. F. Theobald (ed.), Elsevier, New York, 2005, pp. 66–9; E. Cohen, ‘The sociology of tourism: Approaches, issues, and findings’ in *The Sociology of Tourism: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, Y. Apostolopoulos, S. Leivadi and A. Yiannakis (eds), Routledge, London/New York, 1996, p. 59; L. Dwyer, ‘Trends underpinning global tourism in the next decade’ in Theobald, (ed.), *Global Tourism*, pp. 534–5; W. F. Theobald, ‘The meaning, scope, and measurement of travel and

political management of this industry,<sup>7</sup> and (iii) variants of a travel consumerism,<sup>8</sup> which operate increasingly in countries and regions all over the world. As a result, the *pandas* and their trade are affected by the presence of global tourism in the shape of (i) travel agencies, drivers and hotels; (ii) policies and development schemes authored by the ministries of tourism and local tourism authorities; and (iii) changing travel patterns, practices, and expectations of those arriving on site, which today includes foreign tourists as well as Hindus self-identifying as 'tourists' rather than pilgrims.

'Tourism', as I use it here, points to the coming together of a range of phenomena in mid-nineteenth century Europe which serves as a starting point for tourism as we know it today. Key among these were the development of transport technology—in particular railways—and improving living standards that allowed for mass transportation<sup>9</sup> as well as a growing formal tourism industry.<sup>10</sup> It was around this time that the terms 'tourist' and 'tourism' and their equivalent were spreading<sup>11</sup> and travel guidebooks assumed the shape they have today,<sup>12</sup> indicating the development of a specific modern travel

tourism' in Theobald (ed.), *Global Tourism*, pp. 5, 7. It should not be forgotten, however, that a large part of the tourism industry, in particular in relation to domestic tourism in India, is informal. See Gladstone, *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour*.

<sup>7</sup> J. Urry, 'Globalising the tourist gaze', Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/resources/sociology-online-papers/papers/urry-globalising-the-tourist-gaze.pdf>, [accessed 8 March 2016]; M. Lanfant, 'Introduction' in *International Tourism: Identity and Change*, M. Lanfant, J. B. Allcock and E. M. Bruner (eds), SAGE, London/Thousand Oakes/New Delhi, 1995, pp. 2–3, 5; P. Burns, *An Introduction to Tourism and Anthropology*, Routledge, London/New York, 1999, p. 125; S. Wanhill, 'Role of government incentives' in Theobald (ed.), *Global Tourism*, pp. 368, 389.

<sup>8</sup> Urry, 'Globalising the tourist gaze', p. 3; Lanfant et al., *International Tourism*, p. 3; Theobald (ed.), *Global Tourism*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> A. Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society*, Bloomsbury, London, 2011, p. 83; C. M. Hall, *Introduction to Tourism: Dimensions and Issues*, Hospitality Press, French Forest, 2003, p. 45; G. Verhoeven, 'Foreshadowing tourism: Looking for modern and obsolete features—or some missing link—in early modern travel behavior (1675–1750)', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 42, 2013, p. 264; J. Towner, 'The Grand Tour: A key phase in the history of tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 12, 1985, p. 232.

<sup>10</sup> Verhoeven, 'Foreshadowing tourism', p. 278; J. Borocz, 'Travel capitalism: The structure of Europe and the advent of the tourist', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 34, no. 4; Towner, 'The Grand Tour', p. 321.

<sup>11</sup> Borocz, 'Travel capitalism'.

<sup>12</sup> J. M. Mackenzie, 'Empires of travel: British guide books and cultural imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries' in *Histories of Tourism: Representation, Identity and Conflict*,

culture. While a history of tourism in India is yet to be written, we see traces of this travel culture in vernacular guidebooks and travelogues of Indian elites around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> It is also clear that the introduction of the railways in 1853 greatly affected Hindu pilgrimage.<sup>14</sup> What I call 'global tourism' first takes shape in the second half of the twentieth century, which saw the introduction of motorcars, buses, and aeroplanes. It points to the expansion and spread of the tourism industry and variants of a global travel consumerism, but also the creation of governmental and intergovernmental agencies managing and promoting tourism.<sup>15</sup> State involvement in tourism grew after the Second World War, making the promotion of tourism a universal model for development in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>16</sup> This is reflected in the intensification of the Indian government's involvement in tourism in the 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

To unpack the ways in which *pandas* are affected by and adapt their services to the logics of global tourism, I begin by inviting the reader to join me on two guided tours. These give concrete examples of how *pandas* attempt to secure ritual income in Vrindavan today. I then present an outline of the historical trajectory of *pandagiri* in India in general, a trajectory that has provided different kinds of possibilities and constraints for acquiring ritual income and clients. The latest phase of this trajectory brings us to an overview of how *pandas* negotiate tourism at various pilgrimage sites. Returning to Vrindavan, I argue that there has been a transition from the traditional *jajmani* system to the Nanda Rai system, which means that the majority of *pandas* today operate as guides.<sup>18</sup> The basic idea of the Nanda Rai system is

H. K. Walton (ed.), Channel View Publications, Clevedon/Buffalo/Toronto, 2005, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> A. Mukhopadhyay, 'Colonised gaze? Guidebooks and journeying in colonial India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> I. J. Kerr, 'Reworking a popular religious practice: The effects of railways on pilgrimage in 19th and 20th century South Asia' in *Railways in Modern India*, I. J. Kerr (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, 'The sociology of tourism', p. 59; J. Jafari, 'Creation of the inter-governmental World Tourism Organization', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> L. J. Lickorish and C. L. Jenkins, *An Introduction to Tourism*, Reed Educational and Professional Publishing, Oxford, 1997, p. 182; Lanfant et al., *International Tourism*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> K. Hannam and A. Diekmann, *Tourism and India: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London/New York, 2011, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> I was first introduced to this term by a local historian.

that *pandas* conduct religious sightseeing tours (*darshan yatra*)<sup>19</sup> during which they bring pilgrims to their own temples, which they claim to be the house of Nanda, called 'Nanda Rai'. The *pandas* subsequently get a share of the donations they help facilitate. These separate temples are only used for this purpose by the *pandas*.<sup>20</sup>

Given changing travel patterns in Indian domestic travel since independence, I argue that the guided tour has become a crucial component in the operation of contemporary Hindu pilgrimage. In order to secure customers, *pandas* forge connections with travel agencies and drivers and, in some cases, establish their own travel agencies that combine priestly and tourist services.

Having started this article with how *pandas* are viewed by pilgrims and others, I end by showing how *pandas* themselves explain their own methods and the necessity for forced donations. An important part of their understanding of the current state of *pandagiri* is a perceived religious degeneration among contemporary pilgrims. *Pandas'* own sense of travel and pilgrimage trends provides further insight into the changing landscape of domestic tourism in today's India which they remain an important part of, thus far.

The underlying model of my interpretation conceptualizes Hindu pilgrimage and tourism as two identifiable domains or assemblies of socio-cultural activities that are pursued in specific social frameworks and sustained by various organizations or institutions.<sup>21</sup> Following this model, Hindu pilgrimage points to an assembly of religious ideas, narratives, and practices that are tied to special sites designated as *tirthas*, *dhams*, and *kshetras* where gods are assumed to be present and said to have once descended. Tourism points to a modern industry providing services relating to travel, travelling, and travellers which interact with a political domain in the form of tourism ministries and departments. The industry and tourism authorities plan and develop destinations and attractions. These two domains of activities—Hindu pilgrimage and tourism—are historically tied to specific genres of literature (for example, *mahatmyas* and guidebooks), occupational

<sup>19</sup> *Darshan* is a religious concept that typically refers to the auspicious beholding of deities and their manifestations on earth, while *yatra* typically means journey, though it can also refer to pilgrimage. The concept of a *darshan yatra* is therefore a reformatting of a typical guided tour or sightseeing tour of cultural tourism into a religious concept.

<sup>20</sup> I return to the specific details of the Nanda Rai system below.

<sup>21</sup> This is in part informed by Michael Stausberg's understanding of the relationship between religion and tourism. M. Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations and Encounters*, Routledge, London/New York, 2011, p. 8.

groups (for example, priests and tourist guides), paradigmatic practices (for example, deity worship and sightseeing), and important institutions (for example, temple organizations and travel agencies). Given the shared occupation with travel and spaces, such as temples, it is clear that the two domains overlap and interact in various ways, such as when travel agencies promote and sell package tours to pilgrimage sites, or tourist guides cater to pilgrims at religious sites.<sup>22</sup>

With this model we can trace how *pandas* and their trade plug into and combine elements from both domains. The guided tour on Krishna's curse is a case in point, operating at one of the many intersections between Hindu pilgrimage and tourism. Here the *pandas* have reformatted the typical guided tour and sightseeing tour of cultural tourism into a religious concept—the *darshan yatra*. A second example is the travel agent offices established by *pandas* to secure clients for the *darshan yatras*. These offices take the form of a travel agency even though *pandagiri* constitutes their core activity, alongside other tourist services. *Pandas* thus combine elements from tourism and Hindu pilgrimage, offering both the gods' blessings and taxi facilities. Without engaging elements of both domains, I will argue, contemporary *pandas* cannot operate successfully and make a living.

### Krishna's curse

A quick stroll around the narrow lanes of Vrindavan where the pilgrim traffic is most dense makes it clear that guided tours are constantly taking place. Groups vary in size, from a single couple to bigger crowds that have arrived together by bus. These groups are easy to recognize as they are led by a guide telling stories, pointing at objects, shouting for attention, and shepherding people along. Most of these guides are pilgrimage priests. They can be found in clusters, waiting outside temples and key catchment areas where incoming pilgrims are likely to arrive. They approach unescorted pilgrims wherever they see them, offering their guiding services. A central bus parking area is one site where *pandas* locate potential clients. The more upscale buses transporting either domestic or international tourists, however, often come with a licensed guide, authenticated by the tourism authorities, who confidently brushes away the approach of local *pandas*. Next to this

<sup>22</sup> See K. Aukland, 'Retailing religion: Guided tours and guide narratives in Hindu pilgrimage', *Tourist Studies*, forthcoming, DOI: 10.1177/1468797615618038.

parking area stands the grand Rangnath temple around which guides wait for incoming clients. When first observing this scene, I started chatting with a shopkeeper who sat at the entrance to the Rangnath temple selling religious artefacts and souvenirs. He told me that there are between 40 and 50 *pandas* around the Rangnath temple and that their job is to guide. In Vrindavan, he stated, 'guide and *panda* is one and the same' (*guide aur panda ek hi hai*).

I decided to persuade *panda* guides to let me join their tours, which turned out to be difficult. They were happy to take me on a tour alone, but less keen on having me join a group of pilgrims and make observations. As I would later learn, *pandas* do not want outsiders to know their trade secrets or make them public as it could threaten their livelihood. After a number of approaches, I eventually got permission to join a young man and, later, his older uncle who both specialize in Gujarati pilgrims.<sup>23</sup> Both have therefore picked up some Gujarati that they mix with their own dialectic variant of Hindi during their tours. They have further established connections with a wide range of travel agencies that cater to Gujaratis. One such company is Paradise Tour and Travel which was bringing in some 40 pilgrims that day. The group arrived in the company bus and was to be guided by the uncle, with me tagging along. The group had arrived on a package tour with an itinerary that had led them to Rishikesh, Haridwar, and the Akshardham complex in Delhi and Mathura in the days before arriving in Vrindavan. Their visit to Vrindavan would consist of the guided tour along with a visit to two of the latest and more spectacular religious attractions in town: Prem Mandir and Vaishno Devi Ashram.<sup>24</sup> They would then move on to Gokul on the same day, one of the many villages that make up the Braj area that is dotted with stories from Krishna's childhood and youth.

It was 8.20 in the morning when the uncle entered the Paradise Tour and Travel bus to introduce the pilgrims to Vrindavan. At 10.10, almost two hours later, they were back in the bus, having completed their tour. The second group I engaged with was guided by the nephew and consisted of 10 Gujarati pilgrims who had travelled in two separate cars they had hired. They were all in their fifties and sixties and had, like the bus group, travelled to Haridwar and Delhi before their arrival in Vrindavan. Besides making connections with travel agencies, the

<sup>23</sup> I have changed various details in the interest of anonymity.

<sup>24</sup> I am currently working on a manuscript dealing with Prem Mandir, Vaishno Devi Ashram, and other religious attractions in northern India.



two *pandas* also had a network of drivers they cooperated with, the result of which was the opportunity to guide groups such as this one. Their tour was an abridged and concentrated version of the first, lasting for little more than an hour. The two tours were broadly similar, both of them catering to quick visits. The nephew's tour went as follows.<sup>25</sup>

The *panda* brings us straight to the nearby nineteenth-century temple known as Rangnath. We are only given the name of the temple and assured that he will tell us more after we have taken *darshan* of various god images (*murtis*) inside.<sup>26</sup> After a rather quick tour of various deities, we are seated on the ground right outside the back of the temple as the *panda* begins his storytelling. To maintain the pilgrims' attention, he speaks loudly, exhorts the group to stay silent, and, interrupting sections of his narratives, frequently encourages them join in to hail Krishna. The Rangnath temple, we are told, was built by a rich merchant in 1847. Although he was blessed with prosperity, he was not able to have any children. Going to his guru with his troubles, he was told to go to Vrindavan and ask for his wish at the 'main temple' (*main mandir*). With the rosary (*mala*) he received there, his wish was eventually fulfilled with a miracle (*camatkar*) and he had two sons. As a thanksgiving he built the temple we are seeing and donated it to his guru. The *panda* moves on to briefly mention that Vrindavan was nothing but a forest of Tulsi trees 525 years ago. ('Vrinda' means 'tulsi', while 'van' is 'forest', hence the name Vrindavan.)

Here we may pause briefly to reflect on the guide's narrative so far. The fact that pilgrims are first led directly to a temple for *darshan* of the gods indicates that the tour combines religious dimensions (Hindu worship) with elements familiar from guided tours in cultural tourism (interpretations of history and culture). Vrindavan itself, noticeably, is only given a brief introduction at the end, added as a kind of appendix to the main story of the Rangnath temple. The history of the temple is made to revolve around the merchant patron of the temple and raises a set of concerns that will resurface throughout the tour: parenthood, seeking the fulfilment wishes in a 'main temple', rosary, and miracles. Having introduced these elements, the *panda*'s narrative moves directly on to the key story of the tour concerning the meeting of Krishna and Kaliya, the dreadful demon snake.

<sup>25</sup> The *panda*'s narrative during the tour was audio-recorded on 16 March 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Note that in the case of god images, *darshan* also implies an exchange of gazes—the god also looks back at the beholder. See D. L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 7–8.

Variants of the story are familiar to pilgrims and students of Hinduism alike. Once Krishna was playing with his friends when their ball fell into the river exactly where Kaliya was resting. Undeterred by this threat Krishna went in to get the ball. As he entered the water a great fight ensued, but Krishna was victorious. The *panda* also mentions that Krishna's foster mother, Yashoda, had watched the battle unfold, but was too scared to enter the river to help him. To this rather abridged version, which many Hindus have been told by their grandmothers or seen in comic books and children's programmes on television, the *panda* adds a new addition to the more standard versions. After he had beaten the snake, the *panda* explains, Krishna went back to his foster mother Yashoda. She tells Krishna that, while the fight with Kaliya was mere play for him, it was death to her. The *panda* continues:

Krishna replies that 'you talk so much of death, but you went to the river to dive in and yet you have not died. If you had been dying I would have saved you. But your own life was more important for you, not your son's life. That is why you did not dive into the river. Because of this I give a curse (*shrap*) so that in *kaliyug*,<sup>27</sup> sons and daughters will die in their youth while their old parents will continue to live' (*javan javan beta beti mar jaega, aur budha budha ma bap baitha rahega*). He gave this curse to his parents. So this is what all of you witness in this *kaliyug*, that the grandfather remains alive and the grandson is carried on his shoulders (*pota kandhon ke uppar cala jata hai*).<sup>28</sup>

There is, to the best of my knowledge, no well-known precursor for this incident. In the authoritative *Bhagvata Purana*, the aftermath of the fight concerns Kaliya's wives begging Krishna to spare their husband's life, which he agrees to. This new rendition highlights the issue of parenthood rather than Krishna's mercy. It contains a critique of parents who care more for their own lives than those of their children. Because of this fault in Yashoda, Krishna pronounces his terrible curse. The other crucial aspect of the new ending is that it connects these events directly to the lives of the pilgrims since all the pilgrims on the two tours are middle-aged and, more than likely, parents: Krishna's curse is operative in the current age of decay and affects all.

The *panda* continues the story. Krishna's foster father, Nanda Baba, hears Krishna utter his curse and says: 'You have such a small mouth, but you have uttered such a big thing. You should find a solution

<sup>27</sup> *Kaliyug* refers to the fourth and last cosmic era of decay and degeneration in which we now live.

<sup>28</sup> The 'carrying on the shoulder' refers to the deathbed that is carried to cremation.

to this.' Krishna agrees and replies to Nanda that he should go to Vrindavan and donate (*dan karna*) all his cows in his name. Having done this, Nanda returns to tell Krishna that while he was able to donate cows, people living in *kaliyug* will not be able to donate even one cow.

Krishna replies that 'in *kaliyug*, those who come to the abode of Vrindavan with two fistfuls of rice in the name of their son will be free of this curse'. So to be free from this curse rice is donated in Vrindavan.

At this point, the *panda* has brought the narrative back to the pilgrims, their presence in Vrindavan, and what they should do now that they have arrived, namely donate rice.

The *panda* goes on to explain that god (*bhagvan*) will not eat the rice, hence it is given to the thousands of widows who come to live out the remainder of their lives in Vrindavan. The committee of the temple, he explains, distributes rice to the widows, and 'donations of rice are made in the name of your sons' and three options are available—five, 11, and 20 kilograms. For this, one will receive blessed food items (*prasad*) to distribute to family and friends and the rosary of wishes (*manokamna ka mala*). If you wear the rosary after washing it in raw cow's milk, the *panda* explains, god will show his miracle within three months, and your wishes will be fulfilled within one year. He tells us that the 'main temple' for donations is here, and that its image of god appeared from the ground after Swami Haridas (a sixteenth-century musician and poet) practised asceticism (*tapasya*) for 11 long years:

It is through his miracle that there are now 5250 temples in Vrindavan, 365 lodgings for pilgrims (*dharamshalas*), 122 fields (*kshetras*) which are there for serving the ascetics (*sadhus*) and saints (*sants*). And all of them have been built after wishes were fulfilled. Where did their wishes get fulfilled? In the main temple. Now we will have *darshan* of the main temple.

At this point, the *panda* has introduced the pilgrims to the donations of rice that he suggests they should give in order to escape Krishna's curse. The widows, of whom there are many in Vrindavan, are also introduced for the first time here. The connection between rosary and miracle, first mentioned in relation to the merchant patron of the Rangnath temple, reappears in the narrative. So too the notion of a 'main temple', but a connection is now made with the most famous temple in Vrindavan today—the Bankey Bihari temple—since Swami Haridas is believed to be behind the original appearance of the god

image there. In other words, the *panda* is creating the impression that the group will have *darshan* of the Bankey Bihari temple.

On the way to the main temple, however, we make a stop at a home for widows where the *panda* tells us that 2,000 of them sing devotional songs (*bhajan*) and live off of what they receive from the main temple. We pace quickly through the building where a handful of old ladies are sitting and chanting, before we are led to the main temple, which is not the Bankey Bihari. Upon entering we are told that this is the place to worship (*puja*) and give donations in the name of sons. Before we are made to sit down in front of the main display of gods, the pilgrims are instructed to circumambulate a stone representing the mythical Govardhan mountain while the *pandas* take down the name of one's parents and guru.

We are then seated in front of a curtain flanked by a priest sitting with his account book. The scene is more or less exactly that portrayed by John Hawley a little over two decades ago.<sup>29</sup> The temple to which the pilgrims have come is not visited by anyone else other than those brought there by *pandas*. Locals are aware of these temples and that they are used to make pilgrims give donations of which the *pandas* get a share, usually referred to as 'commission'. These donation temples are referred to as 'Nanda Rai' (Nanda's house), since they tend to have claimed connections with Krishna's foster father Nanda. There are several such Nanda Rai temples in Vrindavan as we will see below. Some have several chambers, each of which caters to one group of pilgrims. Each of the chambers will have what one might call an accountant priest sitting next to the god images that are hidden behind a curtain. His job is to note down the name of the donor and the sum given. In the tour we are following here, pilgrims are invited to replicate Nanda's donation of cows in the very same temple he did in order to evade the curse of Krishna.

The pilgrims are told that this is the place where rice is donated in the name of sons, and are asked to focus their minds on Krishna. The curtain is drawn back to show a collection of six images, including Krishna in two forms, his parents, brother, and Radha. It is the small black image of Krishna at the centre that is highlighted:

The black image at the centre is the one that came out of the ground after Swami Haridas practiced asceticism for 11 years in Vrindavan. The image

<sup>29</sup> J. S. Hawley, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Vrindavan*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1992, pp. 31–4.

has two hands. With one he gives the blessing (*ashirvad*) to everyone that ‘as long as I am established in Braj, the sons and daughters [of] those who come to worship me will not be eaten by time [i.e. die prematurely]’. With the other hand he asks for rice donations.

The *panda* briefly refers to the story of the poverty-stricken Sudhama who once came to Krishna’s palace to ask for help. Although he gave Krishna nothing more than a little rice (two fists according to the *panda*), Krishna nevertheless rewarded him with all the wealth he could have hoped for. But the rice offered here, the *panda* informs the group, will be given to the widows who will sing devotional songs in the name of the pilgrims’ sons. This is the first time the widows are connected to the curse. It is also at this point that specific donations are mentioned. We are told that we can give five kilograms of rice for 101 rupees; 11 kilograms for 201 rupees, and that those who are making a one-time-only offering should give 501 kilograms. For this, he repeats, they will get a rosary and blessed food items. At this point the *panda* makes us repeat a short prayer addressing Krishna. He provides it in small sections so we can repeat every word:

Oh Lord [pilgrims respond ‘Oh Lord’]—Wanderer of Vrindavan—we came to your abode—we came to your shelter—in the name of our sons—in happy consent—whatever charity (*seva*)—we may offer—please accept—do accept—fulfil our wishes—and call us time and again—to the abode of Vrindavan—oh Lord.

The prayer ends by listing various names of Krishna, before the *panda* instructs those who wish to give offerings to raise their hands, and state their own names and the names of their children.

The final prayer reflects the *panda*’s effort to define the purpose of coming to Vrindavan for the pilgrims—namely to offer charity, here understood as donations. The actual transaction of money is framed as a donation of rice, which again is presented as a modified version of Nanda’s original donation of cows. The cow donation idiom (*godan*) points to an esteemed ancient practice that is here continued in name. The narratives told by the *panda* have many similarities with the tour described by Hawley: the philanthropic angle vis-à-vis the widows, the connection with Nanda, set prices for donations, and associating the temple actually visited with Bankey Bihari temple.<sup>30</sup> However, the emphasis on filial piety, also noted by Hawley, is given much greater urgency here by the curse of Krishna. The *panda* both suggests that not

<sup>30</sup> Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, pp. 31–4.

giving a donation might endanger the safety of the pilgrims' children, and that this donation is the proper purpose of coming to Vrindavan.

To the disappointment of our *panda*, however, none in our party was willing to raise their hands and donate. They were clearly not convinced of the urgency of Krishna's curse. They were nevertheless made to sit in front of the images quietly for a few minutes before they were able leave. This part of the tour, however, went down much more successfully for the more seasoned uncle. While the nephew had led a small group of ten pilgrims, his uncle had four times more people in his group. Going to the same places and telling the same stories as his nephew, his tour also included a visit to Nidhivan—the forest area where Krishna is said to dance with the female cow shepherds. This visit meant that he ended up taking the group to a different temple to make donations.

This particular temple's courtyard has a special feature. The tree placed in the middle of the courtyard has two small arms sticking out of its trunk. The *panda* announces that, by miraculously showing his two hands, Krishna is making an assurance that the sons and daughters 'will not be eaten by time'. Several of the pilgrims are then made to climb up next to the trunk to test if the hands are real or fake by pushing and shaking them as hard as they can. This creates both wonder and laughter in the group as one after the other goes to test the hands. In the meantime, the *panda* continues to say that Krishna is asking for two fists of rice so that he will save the children.

Having seated the group in front of the images inside the temple, the *panda* talks of the widows who will gain from their donation, which can be 350, 450 or 550 rupees. He makes them repeat a prayer similar to the one above. In it, pilgrims are made to ask Krishna to fulfil their *darshan yatra* of the abode of Vrindavan, and request him thrice to protect their sons from death. Then, instead of asking for donations like his nephew did, he directly asks one of the men in the first row for his name and the name of his children. Their names are immediately recorded in the account book and the *panda* asks how much he would like to donate. The pressure is clearly on the pilgrim. He answers 600 rupees, and the next four men give the same answer while the *panda* repeatedly asks if they are giving it happily while stating that there is no pressure. The sixth pilgrim pledges 500 to which the *panda* mockingly enquires if he should make it less than 500, again asking if he wants to give just 500. The pilgrim finally agrees to give 600. The seventh pledges 300 upon which the *panda* suggests to make it 350 but the pilgrim resists. The eighth does not give his name, stating that

his brother has given, only to be told that his brother has given for his children and that he needs to give for his own. He finally gives 600. 'You have happily had this written down?' the *panda* asks. Then, after five others have given their names and increasingly smaller donations are written down, all are given a receipt of their donation, a little plastic bag with a rosary, and blessed sweets. Finally, the pilgrims are asked to give a small donation at the feet of Krishna's image before they are instructed to go out and circumambulate the tree with the two miraculous arms to complete the tour (*yatra*).

### Historical trajectories

What are we to make of this tour and the curse of Krishna so clearly developed by the *pandas* to secure their income by soliciting pilgrims to give donations? After a different tour with another *panda*, I once observed a pilgrim shouting at the bus conductor while we were on the way out of Vrindavan: 'This was not the main temple!' he exclaimed, referring to how the *panda* had repeatedly stated that they would visit the 'main temple' but they had clearly not seen the Bankey Bihari temple. The same sentiment is found in accounts published on the widely used travel website TripAdvisor in a thread entitled 'Beware of guides in Vrindavan'.<sup>31</sup> From the 37 entries (as at November 2015) it is clear that many pilgrims feel these tours are fraudulent. Participating in a one-day excursion from Delhi to Vrindavan (via the Taj Mahal and Mathura), one of my co-travellers summed up the whole experience of being in the donation temple with the proverb '*paisa phenkh tamasha dekh*' ('Throw money and see the show'). I tested my newly learned expression on an elderly man who wanted to know what I thought of the tour. 'So you got the point,' he replied with a smile.

The dissatisfaction with *pandas* has not gone unnoticed by the tourism authorities. A 2002 report by the Ministry of Tourism on the future prospects of tourism in Uttar Pradesh where Vrindavan is located mentions that 'there is a problem of imposing behaviour by temple priests, as perceived by a section of visitors' in the

<sup>31</sup> TripAdvisor allows travellers to share reviews of their travel and service experiences, while supporting itself through advertising on the site. [www.tripadvisor.in/ShowTopic-g951350-i15414-k4607557-020-Beware\\_of\\_guides\\_in\\_vrindavan-Vrindavan\\_Uttar\\_Pradesh.html](http://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowTopic-g951350-i15414-k4607557-020-Beware_of_guides_in_vrindavan-Vrindavan_Uttar_Pradesh.html), [accessed 20 February 2016].

Mathura-Vrindavan Braj area.<sup>32</sup> In a more recent brochure from the Ministry of Tourism, outlining a new scheme (Swadesh Darshan<sup>33</sup>) for the development of tourist circuits, there is a reference to touts and 'lapka culture'<sup>34</sup> in relation to the planned 'Krishna Circuit'. While there have been some unsuccessful legal attempts at removing *pandas* from certain temples,<sup>35</sup> there are, as a local observer pointed out, three good reasons why nothing has been done in Vrindavan so far: first, the *pandas* are of the priestly class (Brahman), secondly, they are unemployed, and, thirdly, they can put up a fight. Referring to internal competition and fights among *pandas*, a seasoned *panda* concluded that Brahmans are like lions: they do not form agreements to work together, and if they have to, there are bound to be conflicts.<sup>36</sup>

And yet, despite the low regard in which they are held, pilgrims generally accept going along with *pandas*. The feeling I had as a participant in two day-excursions from Delhi to Mathura and Vrindavan was that no pilgrim really makes the decision to hire a *panda*. The guided tour is arranged by the conductor and the *panda* beforehand. Most pilgrims end up going along with the others in the group and whatever appears to be the programme. Ann Gold found that, while Rajasthani pilgrims were bothered by the pushy behaviour of *pandas*, everyone still insisted that the *pandas*' bad behaviour and disposition would not spoil the meritorious nature of donations and offerings.<sup>37</sup> The feeling that *pandas* are, after all, priests and hence necessary for the rituals is probably still a widespread sentiment.<sup>38</sup>

It is tempting to assume that the tours described above, shaped as they are by economic incentives, are the result of modern commercialism and moral decay.<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above, there appears

<sup>32</sup> 'Final report on 20 years perspective for Uttar Pradesh', *Ministry of Tourism*, Chapter 9, p. 15, November 2002. <http://www.incredibleindia.org/images/docs/trade-pdf/surveys-and-studies/perspective-plans-of-states-UTs/up.pdf>, [accessed 20 February 2016].

<sup>33</sup> 'Swadesh Darshan: Integrated Development of Theme-Based Tourist Circuits', *Ministry of Tourism*, p. 20. [http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/News/Final%20Swadesh%20Darshan%20Brochure-16\\_3\\_2015\\_compressed.pdf](http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/News/Final%20Swadesh%20Darshan%20Brochure-16_3_2015_compressed.pdf), [accessed 8 March 2016].

<sup>34</sup> 'Lapka' generally refers to unauthorized guides, photographers, and others who are seen to cheat and harass tourists.

<sup>35</sup> For an on-going case in Nandagao see: <http://news.vrindavantoday.org/2014/11/steps-taken-contain-miscreant-pandas-nandgaon/>, [accessed 20 February 2016].

<sup>36</sup> Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 104, notes a less favourable saying among people in Banaras: 'Brahmans and dogs are two castes that cannot live together [in peace].'

<sup>37</sup> Gold, *Fruitful Journeys*, p. 275.

<sup>38</sup> Gladstone, *From Pilgrimage to Package Tour*, p. 185.

<sup>39</sup> cf. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 108.



to be no traditional precedent for the story of Krishna's curse. This 'absence' appears to make it dubious to some scholars, hence: 'the *canny strategies* of [Vrindavan] *pandas* include setting up *spurious sites* and *claiming* their mythical association with various Krishna legends' (my emphasis).<sup>40</sup> The Vrindavan *panda* can thus be described as 'a merchant of the sacred', telling pilgrims that the temple they are visiting stands where Nanda used to live, even though 'there is no *ancient tradition* to support this *claim*' (my emphasis).<sup>41</sup> The nostalgic notion of a 'past purity and modern corruption' is alluring to pilgrims, observers, and scholars alike.<sup>42</sup> The European colonial notion that Hindu priests in general ruined what was once a pristine religion was adapted by Hindu reformers from Rammohan Roy, via the Arya Samaj, to Vivekananda.<sup>43</sup> These Hindu reformers have certainly helped popularize and sustain perceptions of *pandas* as greedy and corrupt. Historical studies, however, reveal that commercial interests and Hindu pilgrimage have always been intertwined.

The *pandas*' overt attempt to elicit donations in Vrindavan appears to be a deviation from tradition in the eyes of many contemporary observers. However, Knut A. Jacobsen's inquiry into the history of Hindu pilgrimage<sup>44</sup> makes it clear that competition for ritual income and donations by pilgrims have always been important driving forces in its perpetuation. This partly explains the enormous geographical expansion of the pilgrimage tradition,<sup>45</sup> and the continuous focus and emphasis on donations to Brahmans in the Puranic literature on pilgrimage.<sup>46</sup> The proliferation of pilgrimage sites and their promotion through texts indicate that there was a need for Brahmans to expand their client base to maximize income.<sup>47</sup> To attract donors, Puranic literature has always emphasized the easily attainable rewards of visiting pilgrimage sites and invited all sections of society to do

<sup>40</sup> Shinde, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 529.

<sup>41</sup> Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, pp. 30–1.

<sup>42</sup> Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, p. 66; Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*, p. 11–2.

<sup>43</sup> K. W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in the 19th-century Punjab*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, p. 110; R. Gelders and W. Derde, 'Mantras of anti-Brahmanism: Colonial experience of Indian intellectuals', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 38, no. 43, 2003; T. Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, pp. 41, 84.

<sup>44</sup> Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 79, 85.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8.

so.<sup>48</sup> In this respect these texts could be seen as early forms of advertisements, functioning in some ways like tourist brochures do today.<sup>49</sup> The attempts to elicit donations from pilgrims by the *pandas* are, in other words, very much in tune with the history of Hindu pilgrimage as a whole. In what ways does the history of *pandas* and their trade—*pandagiri*—shed light on the tours described above?

The term '*panda*' is a generic term used for groups of priests who cater to pilgrims at the numerous Hindu pilgrimage sites (*tirthas*, *dhams*, *kshetras*) in India. Nominally such pilgrimage priests should belong to a caste of the priestly class (Brahman), but the reality on the ground is often more complicated, as we will see.<sup>50</sup> The title '*tirth purohit*' is sometimes used synonymously, although it may also be used to designate a different type of pilgrimage priest from the *panda*.<sup>51</sup> In contemporary Vrindavan, the priests I spoke to sometimes preferred the *tirth purohit* title, probably because of the bad press associated with *pandas*. These priests cater to pilgrims, providing them with ritual services as well as arranging accommodation, food, and other facilities. Besides the ritual services for which they receive a payment and gifts, they might also take pilgrims on guided tours around the pilgrimage site to visit shops, temples, and other sites. '*Pandagiri*', the term often used for the business of the *pandas*, sometimes has negative connotations. In Varanasi, the expression 'contractor of religion' (*dharm ka thekedar*) is sometimes used as 'a phrase which nicely captures his [the *panda*'s] role as a general "fixer" for both this- and other-worldly comforts of his clients'.<sup>52</sup> A *panda* ideally refers to a member of a Brahman family which has catered to pilgrims for generations. All members of such a family need not follow this occupation, and many combine it with other jobs or take it up after retiring from another job. Histories of *pandagiri* at particular sites also reveal that non-local Brahmans and even non-Brahmans can work for a *panda*, do his job or, indeed, establish themselves as independent *pandas*.

Some *pandas* maintain long-term relationships with families of pilgrims whose visits, ritual activities, and donations they note down

<sup>48</sup> Cf. S. M. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 2003 [1983], pp. 5, 209.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobsen, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*, p. 95.

<sup>50</sup> Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 99.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97. Parry observed that while '*panda*' was used as a generic term for various pilgrimage priests, '*tirth purohit*' was the term used by local priests to describe those keeping registers and maintaining long-term relationships with clients.

<sup>52</sup> Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 98.

in a record book (*bahi*). Such long-standing relationships between *pandas* and clients are known as the *jajmani* system,<sup>53</sup> which refers to the procedure of keeping inherited relationships between a *panda* and a family lineage. A *panda* will typically have the exclusive right to serve clients who come from a specific geographical location and belong to certain castes. The *jajmani* system was well established by the eighteenth century,<sup>54</sup> but a variety of studies from various sites over the last decades indicate that it is declining.<sup>55</sup> What could be the reasons for this decline?

In his historical study of *pandas* in Ayodhya, Peter van der Veer<sup>56</sup> observes that one might speak of the emergence of a modern pilgrimage market during the nineteenth century because *pandas* began to sell and sublet three of their key assets: pilgrim record books, stalls along the river, and the rights to serve elite pilgrims. All of these became marketable goods.<sup>57</sup> An important element in this development was the framing of the *pandas*' assets as property within the legal framework of the British colonizers.<sup>58</sup> As new infrastructure developed over time and key properties on the riverside became settled, those with the most resources were able to negotiate successfully with the state, employing both legal and illegal means.<sup>59</sup>

The *jajmani* system that was thriving in the colonial period began to decline in importance as the twentieth century progressed. With

<sup>53</sup> *Jajman* (or *yajman*) means 'patron of the sacrifice' and refers to the pilgrim. In this context these terms are not related to the *jajmani* system of village distribution. See C. J. Fuller, 'Misconceiving the grain heap: a critique of the concept of the Indian *jajmani* system' in *Money and Morality of Exchange*, J. Parry and M. Bloch (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 33–63; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 97ff.

<sup>54</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 183ff.; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 97ff.; Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway*, pp. 123ff.

<sup>55</sup> B. Chaudhuri, *The Bakreshwar Temple: A Study on Continuity and Change*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, p. 42; Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*, p. 209; van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, p. xv; Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway*, pp. 125ff.; Lochtefeld, 'Pandas', pp. 243–4; K. Shinde, 'Placing communitas: Spatiality and ritual performances in Indian religious tourism', *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 59, 2011, p. 348; L. Whitmore, 'In Pursuit of Maheshvara: Understanding Kedarnath as a Place and as *Tirtha*', PhD thesis, Emory University, Graduate Division of Religion, West and South Asian Studies, Atlanta, 2010, pp. 67–8.

<sup>56</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, p. 241.

<sup>57</sup> cf. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 97–8.

<sup>58</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, p. 260; cf. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 98.

<sup>59</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 256–7.

independence and its associated land reforms, important elite pilgrim patrons such as landlords and royals lost power.<sup>60</sup> From the early twentieth century onwards, successful *pandas* would have had many agents to conduct and assist their business, often taking care of the direct interaction with pilgrims on site or in the pilgrims' homes. With the weakening of the *jajmani* system, many of the *pandas*' agents became entrepreneurs on the post-independence pilgrimage scene where the game was all about securing new clients without necessarily forging long-term *jajmani* relations.<sup>61</sup> This climate has led to intense internal (and often violent) competition, with Mafia-like conditions in places like Varanasi and Ayodhya.<sup>62</sup> In 1982, all *pandas* in Ayodhya were denied access to the riverside by the police for about four months because of violent outbursts between competing *panda* groups.<sup>63</sup> According to van der Veer's account, the contradiction between the priestly role and Mafia-like tendencies in *pandagiri* 'has to be understood in the light of . . . the emergence of a totally impersonal pilgrimage market, in which the control of the flow of pilgrims came to be dominated by agents...'.<sup>64</sup>

This historical review reminds us that not only have pilgrimage and commercial paybacks always gone together,<sup>65</sup> but also that the historical trajectory of *pandas* is in many ways defined by it. In a study of a Maharastrian noble who went on a pilgrimage in the mid-nineteenth century, we find an amusing description of a Prayag *panda* pressuring the royal pilgrim for donations—a scene not unlike that described above.<sup>66</sup> And it pays off, as the *panda* receives not only a considerable amount of money, but also a house and a horse in return for religious benefits and protection. In his study of how and why Rajasthani kings in around 1700 attempted to acquire powerful deity statues cultivated by the Vallabha sect, Norbert Peabody skilfully demonstrates how economic relations are integral to pilgrimage, the fate of pilgrimage temples, and, indeed, the fame and perceived potency of deities at

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 244–5.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 245–6; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 99.

<sup>62</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 185–8, 250–9; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 97–109.

<sup>63</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, p. 258

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 188. See Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 108–9 for a somewhat contrary view.

<sup>65</sup> Reader, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*, p. 11; cf. I. Glushkova, 'Moving God(s)ward, calculating money: Wonders and wealth as essentials of a tirtha-yatra', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 29, 2006, pp. 128–30.

<sup>66</sup> Glushkova, 'Moving God(s)ward', p. 229.

pilgrimage sites.<sup>67</sup> This is surely not specific to India and Hindu pilgrimage. As Michael Stausberg reminds us, ‘medieval pilgrimages were not at all the purely pious religious affairs they are often claimed to be’.<sup>68</sup> As Ian Reader points out, the ‘interweaving of commerce and pilgrimage has been a recurrent theme from early times’.<sup>69</sup>

The perspective we get from Ayodhya and Banares—and indeed Vrindavan—is that *pandagiri* is first and foremost a livelihood, a means to make a living.<sup>70</sup> As noted by van der Veer, the ‘pandas are engaged in a daily struggle for livelihood and their actions and orientations are connected with that struggle’.<sup>71</sup> This surely sheds light on the story of Krishna’s curse and nature of the guided tour during which it was told. The relationship it suggests between *panda* and pilgrim is quite different from the *jajmani* system as we tend to understand it. As van der Veer suggests for Ayodhya, the pilgrimage market in Vrindavan has also become highly impersonal, with *jajmani* relations becoming progressively more infrequent and marginal in the post-independence era. There is, however, one important factor increasingly shaping contemporary *pandagiri* that the historical studies from Ayodhya and Banares do not mention, namely tourism. The interplay between Hindu pilgrimage and tourism, I argue, will further help us to understand the circumstances surrounding Krishna’s curse. But before we return to Vrindavan, it would be beneficial first to look more broadly at how *pandagiri* in general is affected by tourism.

In his monograph on Haridwar, James Lochtefeld lists a variety of reasons for the decline of the *jajmani* system, including diminishing faith in the efficacy of rituals, the growth of Hindi as lingua franca, changing motives for travel which indicate a shift from pilgrimage to vacation, better transportation, and improved accommodation.<sup>72</sup> New forms of media, such as newspapers and guidebooks, which spread information about pilgrimage destinations and how to get there,

<sup>67</sup> N. Peabody, ‘In whose turban does the lord reside? The objectification of charisma and the fetishism of objects in the Hindu kingdom of Kota’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 33, 1991, pp. 750–1.

<sup>68</sup> Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, p. 66.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*, p. 5. See Lochtefeld, ‘Pandas’, pp. 243–4 for a more idealistic perspective on *pandagiri*. See also van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 259–61, for an argument against more idealistic interpretations of *pandas* and *pandagiri*, a position I broadly support in this article.

<sup>71</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, p. 260.

<sup>72</sup> Lochtefeld, *God’s Gateway*, pp. 125, 128.

should also be mentioned as a factor.<sup>73</sup> Barring the two first factors listed by Lochtefeld, the remaining three, along with guidebooks, are intimately connected to the tourism industry.

One important part of the tourism industry affecting Hindu pilgrimage is accommodation and hotels. Many pilgrims who can afford it prefer to stay in hotels and privately run guesthouses rather than traditional pilgrim lodgings or homes of *pandas*.<sup>74</sup> Some of the more well-off *pandas* in 1970s Bakreshwar (West Bengal) adapted to this development by joining the tourism industry, establishing and running their own guesthouses and hotels.<sup>75</sup> A similar example from Haridwar is the Purohit Lodge, run by a wealthy *panda* family. Purohit Lodge has rooms in various price ranges, 'a restaurant, a tea and cold drink stall, and a store selling woollen goods, brass vessels, and woodwork'.<sup>76</sup>

*Pandas* in Pushkar have been known to protest against tourism in the form of hotels serving alcohol and meat near the lake and the ritual centre of the town, and badly behaved international tourists (for whom they nevertheless perform *puja*).<sup>77</sup> At the same time, many priests have sold their rights to their traditional Indian clientele to other priests and left their trade to look for jobs in the tourism industry.<sup>78</sup> In response to the decline of clients and ritual income in Haridwar, the *pandas* have created a visible and public association, the Ganga Sabha, whose aim is, in part, to make sure that the pilgrims continue to use them and their services.<sup>79</sup>

The tourism industry has also ushered in new travel practices, referred to in the introduction as the spread of global travel consumerism. In his study of the Bengali pilgrimage site Bakreshwar from the late 1970s, Buddhadeb Chaudhuri noted how highly educated urban dwellers made up a substantial number of the visitors. Many of them reported that they did not come for rituals or religion but simply for pleasure, following an itinerary that included

<sup>73</sup> Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*, p. 209.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208, fn. 16; Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway*, pp. 243–4.

<sup>75</sup> Chaudhuri, *The Bakreshwar Temple*, pp. 30, 70–72.

<sup>76</sup> Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway*, p. 135, fn. 36.

<sup>77</sup> C. A. Joseph and A. P. Kavoori, 'Mediated resistance: Tourism and the host community', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 28, 2007; C. A. Joseph, 'Hindu nationalism, community rhetoric and the impact of tourism: The "divine dilemma" of Pushkar' in *Raj Rhapsodies: Tourism, Heritage and the Seduction of History*, C. E. Henderson and M. Weisgrau (eds), Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Joseph, 'Hindu nationalism', p. 210.

<sup>79</sup> Lochtefeld, *God's Gateway*, p. 141.

non-religious destinations.<sup>80</sup> A study conducted in the late 1960s found that Hindu visitors at pilgrimage sites self-identified as tourists rather than as pilgrims.<sup>81</sup> The contemporary blending of homage and holiday among Hindus in Indian domestic tourism<sup>82</sup> has been an ongoing development that goes back several decades. It is no wonder then that *jajmani* relationships were seen to be disappearing, while various rituals for pilgrims were increasingly conducted in abbreviated forms at Bakreshwar<sup>83</sup> and other pilgrimage sites. In Haridwar, Lochtefeld points out that both ‘individual *pandas* and the Ganga Sabha are trying to adapt to the shift from traditional pilgrimage patterns toward a growing stress on sightseeing and tourism—individual *pandas* by opening tourist-related businesses, and the Ganga Sabha by promoting “first-class facilities”’.<sup>84</sup>

The last key aspect of the tourism industry that sustains the new travel practices noted above, and which affects *pandas* and their trade, is the business of selling travel itself. This business is closely related to two of the factors that have led to a decline of the *jajmani* system: increased transportation opportunities and the spread of information about sites and how to get to them. Travel agencies make journeys into a consumer product that they package. In this economy, pilgrimage sites are advertised by travel agencies and tourist departments as desirable destinations in various media outlets, ranging from pamphlets to the internet.<sup>85</sup> The virtues of Varanasi and Vrindavan are no longer just eulogized in Sanskrit *puranas* and *shastras*, but also in travel brochures, advertisement pamphlets, and guidebooks.

### ***Pandagiri in Vrindavan***

Returning to Vrindavan, Kiran Shinde has observed that many pilgrims report that they visit for both recreational and religious

<sup>80</sup> Chaudhuri, *The Bakreshwar Temple*, pp. 54–7.

<sup>81</sup> Bhardwaj, *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage*, pp. 154, 170.

<sup>82</sup> S. Singh, *Domestic Tourism in Asia: Diversity and Divergence*, Earthscan, London, 2009, pp. 96–7.

<sup>83</sup> Chaudhuri, *The Bakreshwar Temple*, pp. vi–I, 40–4, 51, 60–1, 88.

<sup>84</sup> Lochtefeld, *God’s Gateway*, p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> For colonial and post-colonial examples, see A. Mukhopadhyay, ‘Colonised gaze? Guidebooks and journeying in colonial India’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 37, p. 667; and Chaudhuri, *The Bakreshwar Temple*, pp. 49–51.

reasons, and many report that they would not participate in specific pilgrimage rituals or wait for the communal *arati* worship at key temples.<sup>86</sup> This is coupled with an increase in day visitors wanting to experience the town's religious sights in a short time.<sup>87</sup> Several of the entries on the aforementioned TripAdvisor thread are indicative of this. One pilgrim describes how they had sought a guide 'for a quick wrap of 2/3 [of the] main temples in Vrindavan'.<sup>88</sup> Vrindavan's proximity to Delhi means that day excursions can be made by private or hired car. The growth of the Golden Triangle circuit together with the opening of the Yamuna Expressway in 2012, which is adjacent to Vrindavan, also means that the town has a high number of short-stay visitors. Groups of pilgrims arrive by bus, such as the group guided by the uncle above. They are usually travelling on a busy schedule that includes several pilgrimage sites. Hence, Vrindavan can only be given a few hours that tends to exclude ritual bathing in Yamuna but includes a guided tour. One of the most popular day excursions offered by budget travel agencies in Delhi is a trip that includes visits to both the Taj Mahal and Vrindavan. Participating on two such tours, I noted that we spent around an hour in Vrindavan on a trip that started at 6.30 in the morning and only returned around midnight. That hour consisted of a guided tour with a *panda* and nothing else.

Improved transportation facilities, package tours, and dense itineraries have resulted in an increase in the number of pilgrims staying for short periods. These developments have helped the growth of a large, impersonal, rapid turnover market which contemporary *pandagiri* attempts to tap into. It is in this context that the guided tour becomes a suitable mode of interaction as it can cover a lot of ground ('quick wrap') in a short time.

Guided tours in one form or another have surely always been part of Hindu pilgrimage. Earlier studies from other sites also show how they constituted one part of a longer visit that incorporated various activities.<sup>89</sup> At that time, *pandas* would offer a guided tour as just one of several other services available to pilgrims. This is no longer the

<sup>86</sup> Shinde, 'Entrepreneurship', p. 530.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 533; K. Shinde, 'Visiting sacred sites in India: Religious tourism or pilgrimage?' in *Religious tourism and pilgrimage festivals management: An international perspective*, R. Raj and N. D. Morpeth, CABI, Wallingford/Oxfordshire/Cambridge, 2007, p. 191.

<sup>88</sup> [http://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowTopic-g951350-i15414-k4607557020Beware\\_of\\_guides\\_in\\_vrindavan-Vrindavan\\_Uttar\\_Pradesh.html](http://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowTopic-g951350-i15414-k4607557020Beware_of_guides_in_vrindavan-Vrindavan_Uttar_Pradesh.html)

<sup>89</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, p. 198; Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 103–4.



case in Vrindavan as the guided tour often becomes the sole arena for *pandas* to secure ritual income.

This brings me to a key argument, namely that, for many Hindu pilgrims today, the guided tour is the main arena for interaction with a pilgrimage site. The guided tour, therefore, is crucial in understanding how contemporary Hindu pilgrimage works and has adapted to new travel practices. *Pandas*, therefore, have adjusted by offering guided tours infused with religious content and meaning. Returning to the story of Krishna's curse, we may recall that the uncle had the pilgrims repeat a prayer before they were asked to give donations. In it, pilgrims are made to ask Krishna to fulfil their *darshan yatra*. On the one hand, then, the *darshan yatra* taps into tourism in the form of changing travel patterns and the increase of short-stay visitors. On the other, it draws on the tourism format of the guided tour, while framing it as Hindu religious practice.

Travel agencies in Vrindavan and nearby Mathura also promote *darshan yatra* as a product that consists of a one-day package tour to the most important villages on the larger *Braj yatra*. The government's tourism corporation also runs a *Braj yatra* bus that starts in Mathura, before going on to Vrindavan and four other villages. One of these is Nandagao where crowds of *pandas* are waiting for visitors to give them a tour on the terrace of the temple and inspire them to give donations. Here too, pilgrims are made to repeat a prayer so that their *darshan yatra* can be fulfilled. It has been argued that the introduction of package tours in Hindu pilgrimage is indicative of sacrilege.<sup>90</sup> Shinde claims there has been 'a transformation of pilgrimage into mere "sightseeing tour[s]"' in Vrindavan.<sup>91</sup> Rather than arguing for the collapse of Hindu pilgrimage, the approach suggested here invites us to think in terms of new tourism elements becoming part of the pilgrimage tradition (guided and package tours) and traditional pilgrimage institutions (the *pandas*) and practices (visiting pilgrimage sites), thus adapting to the changes brought about by tourism.<sup>92</sup> How then has *pandagiri* adapted to these changes, besides the development of the *darshan yatra*?

The question takes me to a second crucial argument. While a proper history of *pandagiri* in Vrindavan—and indeed Mathura and the larger Braj area—is yet to be written (and it would be a fascinating study),

<sup>90</sup> Singh, *Domestic Tourism in Asia*, p. 96.

<sup>91</sup> Shinde, 'Visiting sacred sites in India', p. 194.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, p. 66.

it is clear that Vrindavan *pandagiri* has seen a gradual transition from the *jajmani* system to the Nanda Rai system over the last five decades. In the latter system, the *pandas*' strategy with regard to securing clients and ritual income is no longer to create long-term relationships. Instead, they bring pilgrims to Nanda Rai temples owned by fellow *pandas* and they get a share of the donations they manage to secure. While *jajmani* relations continue in certain pockets and among a minority of *panda* families, the contemporary scene is dominated by the Nanda Rai system. According to a well-informed local observer, the system arrived from Gokul where Nanda's house is widely believed to have been located. A veteran *panda* also made comparisons between *pandagiri* in Gokul and Vrindavan, providing another indication that there is a connection between the two places and the spread of the Nanda Rai system.

While groups of *pandas* operate as guides in other places as well,<sup>93</sup> the *pandas* in Vrindavan also saw an opportunity to build their own temples. The 'main temple' that the pilgrims were taken to by the *pandas* referred to earlier was actually a Nanda Rai temple. According to three independent sources in Vrindavan, these Nanda Rais started appearing about 50 years back. Today there are at least ten such temples in Vrindavan, although I suspect there are more. According to one local observer about 200 families are dependent on income raised by the Nanda Rai system. Exactly how the ownership of the Nanda Rai temples is organized and how they cooperate with individual *pandas* is not clear to me.

Part of the reason why it is difficult to obtain more data on these matters is the secrecy and reported threat of violence that surrounds them. Most *pandas* are not willing to share information regarding the pecuniary and more business-related aspects of their trade. While talking to a group of younger *pandas* who were willing to share details about the workings of contemporary *pandagiri*, one of the older *pandas* interrupted the conversation, telling the younger men that they were revealing their trade secrets. The recorder had to be stopped more than once. As in Banares,<sup>94</sup> and surely other pilgrimage sites, Vrindavan *pandas* have developed a secret code so that they may freely communicate about business matters with one another in front of

<sup>93</sup> Parry, *Death in Banaras*, pp. 102–3.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

pilgrims.<sup>95</sup> Thus, reportedly, *triya* stands for *yatri* (traveller/pilgrim), while *netr* (eye) means 200 rupees as it refers to a pair. Local people are generally aware of the strategies and conduct of *pandas*, but keep out of it since public critique can result in violent repercussions. While conducting interviews with the assistance of my colleague Moumita Sen, we were in fact discouraged more than once by *pandas*. In one case we were questioned rather aggressively about what we would be writing, with the result that we ended our research efforts the day afterwards. As in Banares and Ayodhya, our observations, along with the input from local observers, indicated that contemporary Vrindavan *pandagiri* has its fair share of rough young men with criminal cases connected to them.

Like the Joshi Brahmins in Banares then, Vrindavan *pandas* have found short-term relationships to be better suited to continuing their trade while exhorting pilgrims to give as much as possible as in the saying: 'take[ing] all the golden eggs even if it means killing the chicken'.<sup>96</sup> In this approach, no long-term relationships are developed with a *jajman*, there is no staying over at the *pandas*' residences, but instead guided tours are offered to a growing rapid-turnover market. The guided tour has become increasingly central given the changes in travel patterns over the last decades with a growing number of short-stay visitors. Thus, over time, guide and *panda* have become 'one and the same', as the shopkeeper initially told me. This is also revealed on the business cards of two of the *pandas* I spoke to, one of them listing 'Teerth Purohit (Ritual priest, Guide)' as the profession, the other simply 'International guide'.

The Nanda Rai system restructures how *pandas* can secure a ritual income for their sustenance. What then about the strategies for securing clients? Here, I argue that there has been a transition to what *pandas* colloquially refer to as 'street *pandagiri*' (*sarak ki pandagiri*), which goes hand in hand with the Nanda Rai system. The owners of Nanda Rai temples can technically sit idly by, waiting for pilgrims to be brought in. Those *pandas* bringing pilgrims in, however, must roam the streets and wait at strategic points to pursue potential clients. I was not able to decipher the various rules among the *pandas* as to who is allowed to catch pilgrims where and how they mitigate competition in

<sup>95</sup> Varanasi boatmen also operate in a similar way. See A. Doron, 'Encountering the "other": Pilgrims, tourists and boatmen in the city of Varanasi', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 16, 2005, p. 169.

<sup>96</sup> Parry, *Death in Banaras*, p. 107.

street *pandagiri*. In general I was told that they make sure to approach pilgrims one at the time so as to avoid open competition. When offering a local tour, the *panda* suggests a price based on the financial status he believes the potential clients to have. When someone finally succeeds in securing a customer, he will provide a tour according to the wishes of the client and typically end up by bringing them to a Nanda Rai. Here he will receive a certain percentage of the donation, which, according to several, can be as much as 80 per cent. This is where the recording of donations—which might help boost the pilgrims' confidence in the temple's management of donations—<sup>97</sup>ensures that the *panda* can later return and collect his rightful share. Besides donations, *pandas* also have agreements with local shopkeepers selling religious paraphernalia to ensure that they receive commission from goods purchased by 'their' pilgrims.<sup>98</sup>

The history of *pandagiri* in Banares and Ayodhya reveal that in the past railway stations were sites of violent competition as they served as key locations for securing incoming clients.<sup>99</sup> Vrindavan *pandas* today, however, speak of the importance of keeping up their connections with travel agencies and drivers. Such connections, including contacts with hotel and guesthouse staff, constitute an alternative to roaming the streets to find clients, although it does mean sharing revenue between more people. Travel agencies arrange lodging, vehicles and drivers, itinerary and programmes, and, to some extent, have taken the role of the *pandas'* agents in earlier times.<sup>100</sup> Since they are responsible for bringing many of the more well-off (and hence attractive) visitors, making connections with them can be highly valuable. While some *pandas* have managed to create connections with travel agencies, more often we found that *pandas* have come to informal agreements with drivers.

The young man and his uncle conducting the tours described above proudly presented dozens of business cards bearing the names of various travel agencies when my colleague and I went to interview them in their homes. Claiming they had connections with at least a hundred travel agencies, the uncle explained that this is their business secret. The display of business cards came as a response to my question about whether they still keep traditional registers and

<sup>97</sup> Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, pp. 32–3.

<sup>98</sup> For more on such relations in Rishikesh, see Aukland, 'Retailing religion'.

<sup>99</sup> van der Veer, *Gods on Earth*, pp. 251–2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

*jajmani* relationships. While the answer was in the affirmative, we were first shown small diaries that appeared to contain the contact information of various people, which had not been in use for several years. It seems they had moved from the bigger traditional registers to small, portable diaries before business cards and mobile phones had taken over. Until recently, they had had a very good ‘setting’<sup>101</sup> with a travel agency connected with the Akshardham temple in New Delhi. They would bring groups from Gujarat on package tours that included New Delhi, Haridwar, and then Vrindavan (and Mathura). Now they predominantly have connections with agencies in Gujarat that sell packaged tours, as the nephew pointed out. The group we met above, arriving on the Paradise Tour and Travel bus that got to experience Vrindavan through the story of Krishna’s curse, was one such group from Gujarat. The key to increasing one’s connections with travel agencies, they claimed, was to create satisfied customers and thus build a reputation based on good practice (*vyavahar*). This is surely quite a balancing act given that they simultaneously need to elicit donations, as we saw the uncle do rather successfully.

More direct and immediate contacts are made with those who physically bring pilgrims to Vrindavan, such as bus conductors on day excursion buses coming from Delhi or local taxi drivers. Participating in a two-day excursion from Delhi I experienced how this network functions from the point of view of a pilgrim. Having left from Mathura, we were suddenly, and somewhat unexpectedly, joined by a *panda* who seemed to come out of nowhere. Without any announcement from our conductor, he appeared in the aisle of the bus, talking and priming us for our visit to Vrindavan and, eventually, the Nanda Rai featuring the tree with the two hands sticking out of its trunk. At the end of the tour, when we were all back in the bus, I spotted the quick and subtle exchange of cash between the *panda* and the driver. As long as a driver or conductor is happy with his share, the ‘setting’ between them and the *panda* will continue. It is in forging these relations that we see the latest development in Vrindavan *pandagiri*.

Along the parking area near Rangnath temple one can find a series of small ‘tour and travel’ offices that carry the names Do Bhai (Two Brothers), Tin Bhai (Three Brothers), and so on, all the way up to Ath Bhai (Eight Brothers). On the surface they look like any other low-budget tour and travel office, advertising various destinations and

<sup>101</sup> ‘Setting’ is one of those terms used in the informal sector (and otherwise) to indicate an agreement, arrangement or unwritten contract between two parties.

a taxi service at the entrance. What makes them different from other local tour operators,<sup>102</sup> however, is that they have all been set up by groups of *pandas* within the last 20 years. In fact, by all accounts, these were set up in order to collect and cement as many connections with drivers and travel agencies as possible. One of these companies we spoke to was still mostly preoccupied with drivers, claiming to have between 150–250 individual contacts. The driver will first bring customers to the office. Here, the driver can park his vehicle, relax, and have a lie down under a fan while the *pandas* do their bit. After the pilgrims have made their donations, the *panda* will give the driver a share, ensuring that all parties are happy. By the same token, the *pandas* will also call upon these drivers when pilgrims request a taxi. It is difficult to say how popular this model is, although the creation of eight such firms does speak of some success. The advantage of creating such a firm, the owners stated, is partly that pilgrims are more likely to trust them than street *pandas* since they have an office where one can complain, and partly that drivers get a place to relax while their group is on their tour. Creating these firms is thus a step up from street *pandagiri* and an attempt to adapt to the current climate by connecting with both drivers and travel agencies, and mimicking the business model of the latter.

The second company we spoke to had managed to purchase a few cars and could thus arrange for day excursions in the Braj area for walk-in customers. One of the owners here stressed that he was not really engaged in *pandagiri*, although this had been the profession of his forefathers. He was a 'travel agent'. While the men we spoke to in the first company generally stated that they provide services for tourists, such as hiring drivers and providing car services, some of them eventually agreed that they also did *pandagiri*. As one pointed out, they do *pandagiri* and sometimes arrange for other services. The overall impression is that although these offices take the form of a travel agency, *pandagiri* constitutes their core activity. Combining priestly and tourist services, they demonstrate the creative ways in which *pandas* bring together a business model from tourism (travel agency) with Hindu pilgrimage (*pandagiri*).

<sup>102</sup> Shinde, 'Religious tourism: Exploring a new form of sacred journey in North India' in *Asian Tourism: Growth and Change*, J. Cochrane (ed.), Elsevier, Amsterdam/Boston/London, 2008, p. 255, notes that more than 50 tour operators have established agencies between 2001–2006.

In sum, *pandas* are responding to tourism-related trends that are taking place all over India. In Vrindavan, the modus operandi of contemporary *pandas* has adjusted to tourism in various ways. By moving away from the *jajmani* system and favouring the Nanda Rai system and street *pandagiri*, *pandas* have adapted themselves to becoming guides who yield religious authority. They further tap into the tourism trade by making connections with travel agencies and drivers. With the *darshan yatras* and their travel agencies, they have not just adapted to tourism, but made use of formats and models emanating from the tourism trade, combining them with practices and meanings from Hindu pilgrimage. Contemporary Vrindavan *pandagiri*, then, cannot successfully operate unless *pandas* tap into and combine resources stemming from both tourism and their traditional trade. Connections with travel agents and Krishna's curse are both necessary in order to secure both clients and ritual income in the age of global tourism.

### **Acting, cheating, and the necessity of forced donations: *pandas*' perspectives on their own methods and the contemporary pilgrim**

As a result of the Nanda Rai system, *pandas* have developed strategies to inspire and convince pilgrims to give donations. While the story of Krishna's curse provides us with an insight into one way in which pilgrims are made to give donations, another popular strategy has been to offer marble plates on which pilgrims can have their names inscribed. This is portrayed in the aforementioned TripAdvisor thread. In the first entry from July 2011<sup>103</sup> the author describes being taken to a temple, made to believe that donations would go to widows, and asked to donate three, six or 12 thousand rupees. For this they would get a receipt and his name and the names of his party would be inscribed on a marble plate to be hung on the temple wall, another practice that echoes an ancient honourable tradition. 'If you try to talk to each other,' he adds, 'he [the *panda*] will scare you with curses and bad luck.' Two other contributors mention having given as much as 13,790 rupees for a marble plate. I did unfortunately not get to experience the *pandas*' marble plate pitch, though I was shown more

<sup>103</sup> [www.tripadvisor.in/ShowTopic-g951350-i15414-k4607557-020-Beware\\_of\\_guides\\_in\\_vrindavan-Vrindavan\\_Uttar\\_Pradesh.html](http://www.tripadvisor.in/ShowTopic-g951350-i15414-k4607557-020-Beware_of_guides_in_vrindavan-Vrindavan_Uttar_Pradesh.html)

than once that foreigners had given donations as the donors' names and country of residence are listed on these plates.

The term '*cari*' is reportedly the secret code word for inspiring donations, or making people give donations (*dan karvana*). The uncle conducting the tour described above proudly explained that they have become masters in categorizing pilgrims according to different types and then approach a given client accordingly: 'We know what you are thinking,' he proclaimed. 'We make some cry and others laugh—they might believe that the god image (*murti*) is just a stone, so we are the ones that put life into the stone.' It is clearly in the context of this mindset and the changing conditions for interacting with pilgrims that the story of Krishna's curse has developed. Another *panda* openly admitted, after some time, that those who know how to put on a great 'performance' and 'do acting' (*acting karna*) are the most successful ones. This is now a business, he concluded, a business that provides a livelihood, echoing the van der Veer above.

In this performance to inspire donations, *pandas* employ various rhetorical devices and narrative strategies. The Nanda Rai in question must be given a history and a special significance so that it makes sense to give donations there. Thus, relatively recently built temples become the house of Nanda, the 'main temple' of Vrindavan, with a story behind the appearance of its main image, identical to that of Bankey Bihari, the most famous and popular temple in Vrindavan. And the donations are claimed to be used for the welfare of widows, even though this might not be the case.<sup>104</sup> A retired man, operating as a *panda* only in old age, lamented that the *pandas* of today have to resort to all kinds of tricks and cheating to inspire donations. Like others, he partly blamed outsiders and non-Brahmans who had entered *pandagiri* for this development. Yet, as he pointed out, the basic idea of pilgrimage is to give donations to earn merit (*punya*). And no matter how much *pandagiri* has become a matter of business, the efficacy of this is not affected. This echoes rural Rajasthani pilgrims' perceptions as well,<sup>105</sup> and is probably part of the reason why many pilgrims continue to employ *pandas* despite their reputation.

The second part of the *panda's* argument was interesting and helps us to understand how they explain and justify their approaches to

<sup>104</sup> I got the idea that this not the case today, in particular from one senior *panda* sitting in a Nanda Rai waiting for incoming clients, who aggressively asserted that they do not give anything to widows.

<sup>105</sup> Gold, *Fruitful Journeys*, p. 275.



themselves. He argued that while pilgrims might give donations in a temple like Bankey Bihari, it is the *panda's* (or *tirth purohit* as he preferred) job to inspire donations elsewhere. Since the type of pilgrim has degenerated over time, losing the piety they once had, they now need to be instructed to give donations. In earlier times they did it happily, but today they need to be told. This perceived degeneration in contemporary pilgrims therefore partly legitimizes the methods used by *pandas* in contemporary *pandagiri*. It also brings us back to the issue of changing travel patterns. Leaving aside the moral and religious judgements *pandas* make regarding contemporary pilgrims in Vrindavan, it is clear that they have a very real sense of how Indian travel culture is evolving, with busy schedules and itineraries being important elements that shape their trade.

The same *panda* further made a very clear distinction between the 'tourist' and the '*tirthyatri*' (pilgrim). Today we have tourists, he claimed, whereas in the past there were pilgrims. The latter came with *bhav* (a disposition, purpose, emotion) and were interested in giving donations and taking ritual baths. They would donate gold, silver, and freshly harvested grains that *pandas* would record in their traditional registers and collect in the off-season as per traditional *jajmani* procedure. They slept on the floor in the *pandas'* residences, considered the simple food they received there as blessed food (*bhog*), conducted the traditional rituals, respected *pandas*, fed them ceremoniously, and worshipped at their feet. The tourists of today do not have a pilgrim's disposition (*tirth ka bhav nahi hai*). They come with cars, go on picnics,<sup>106</sup> take photos, and are unaware of the importance of Vrindavan. They want convenience (*suvridha*) and lack the religious spirit (*dharmik bhavna*). They go to museums, are interested in architecture, and visit for aesthetic reasons.

Other *pandas* I spoke to did not make a distinction between pilgrim and tourist—'What's the difference? We say tourist in English and *tirthyatri* in our language' (*kya farak hai? angrezi me tourist bolte hai, hamari bhasa me tirthyatri bolte hai*). Yet, they all presented a broadly similar outline regarding the decline of a *jajmani* system when things were much better,<sup>107</sup> and claimed there had been a religious and moral degeneration among visitors: 'The new generation has less

<sup>106</sup> The idea of going on or 'making a picnic' (*piknik banate hai*) in this context refers to a wide range of outdoor leisure activities beyond the specific act of having a packed meal or bringing food on an outing.

<sup>107</sup> Whitmore, 'In Pursuit of Maheshvara', pp. 67–8.

faith (*manna*), the older had a lot of faith.' A recurrent theme is that people today do not have time. The two groups we joined on guided tours above were both making short stops in Vrindavan. As one *panda* pointed out, people today only stay for two hours before they move on to Agra (presumably to see the Taj Mahal). Hence they do not undertake a pilgrimage (*tirthyatra*), they only do '*car yatra*', referring to the contemporary practice of arriving and leaving Vrindavan in cars and completing the traditional pilgrimage of Braj in rented cars.<sup>108</sup> They come with girlfriends and boyfriends. They stroll around with their wives, and go shopping and such things (*shopping vopping*) during their stay. There used to be religious devotion (*bhakti*) and interest in the stories of Krishna's divine play (*lilas*), but now people want to see the newest sights (*darshan*) such as Prem Mandir. (At present this is probably the most popular of the new, modern temples, besides the ISKCON temple. The temple complex has a fast food canteen and utilizes entertainment technology such as a musical fountain with video projection and robotronics.) Today's visitors to Vrindavan, the nephew pointed out, are not 'spiritual' but are interested in entertainment and eating snacks and fast food from street vendors. These, then, are the main characteristics of the typical contemporary visitor to Vrindavan according to the *pandas*. They have made the basis of the *pandas*' income precarious, and, as I was repeatedly told, there is no future in *pandagiri*. The tourism policy documents mentioned earlier, which specifically refer to the *pandas* as a 'management problem', further point to the dark clouds gathering on the horizon of their trade. As more than one *panda* pointed out, they are living in *kaliyug* after all.

<sup>108</sup> *Tirthyatra* is the standard Hindi term for pilgrimage, whereas the traditional pilgrimage route that all the sites related to Krishna in the Braj region, including Vrindavan, is known as the *Brajyatra*. See Shinde, 'Religious tourism', for a description of a *car Braj yatra*.