

# Commodification and Religion: A Sociological Study of Budheshwar Temple in Lucknow

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## Abstract

Religious institutions across the world are undergoing processes of increasing commodification under the influence of consumer culture. The paper aims to contribute to empirical and theoretical understanding of this phenomenon through in-depth sociological case study of the Budheswar Temple in Lucknow, India. The thousand-year-old temple dedicated to Lord Shiva has witnessed expanding commercialization in recent decades, converting many previously gratis religious offerings and spaces into paid services catering to wealthy devotees and high-end tourism. This study adopts a quantitative, embedded single-case approach to investigate the multifaceted impact of commodification on various stakeholders associated with the temple, including priests, vendors, devotees and businesses. It also critically examines the contestation and negotiations surrounding the temple's commodification through analyzing the perspective and symbolic interpretation of diverse stakeholders. The paper has two objectives as first to record and evaluate the various commercial additions and modified religious customs found inside the complex of the temples. Second is to examine different aspects of commodification of the stakeholders associated with Budheswar Temple. Data was collected using observation and in-depth interview on twenty-four key informants.

**Keywords:** Commodification, Religion, Stakeholders, Budheshwar Temple, Commercialization

## 1. Introduction

Religious commodification, a burgeoning conceptual and methodological framework, holds a significant potential for unraveling the complex interplay between global realities and sociological understanding, as noted by Grace Davie (2007: 1). The intricate nexus between the highly dynamic market economy and the convergence of religion is shaped by market mechanisms, technological advancements, and the global flow of people, capital, and information including religious symbols and institutions. In response to the forces of the competitive market, religion finds themselves reinventing to capture attention and affiliation from “consumers” in the “spiritual marketplace”. Religious commodification encompasses multifaceted processes, contributing to the expanding marketization of religious faiths, pervasive fragmentation of social life, and the proliferation of choices related to “the mode of believing and the structure of sensibilities”.

The increasing prominence of religious commodification demands attention, promoting significant responses within the sociology of religion. Scholars like Park and Baker highlight the substantial expansion of religious publication as “unnoticed by academics but not by mass audience,” underscoring the importance of understanding this dynamic. Recognizing major field work, including “God

in Popular Culture” “Selling God”, “Spiritual Marketplace”, “Commodifying Everything”, and others, it becomes apparent that religious commodification is a compelling field for sociological investigation [1]. The paper aims to explore the effect of commodification on religion, with special reference to Budheswar Temple situated in Lucknow. Religious institutions have traditionally played a pivotal role in society, offering meaning, moral guidance, and community cohesion. However, the contemporary trend of commodification and commercialization has impacted numerous sacred spaces. Temples, churches, mosques, and synagogues are increasingly subject to market logics and consumerist pressures, incorporating commercial elements, practices, and transactions. Through an in-depth sociological case study, this research will delve into the transformation of Budheswar Temple, an essential Hindu pilgrimage site in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, to understand the implication of commodification on religious spaces.

### 1.1. Historical Background of the Temple

In the heart of Lucknow stands the ancient Budheshwar Mahadev Temple, a holy site steeped in mythology and reverence. Legend tells that Lakshmana, seeking divine guidance from his brother Rama's wife Sita, found solace in this very spot. Distraught by their impending separation, Lakshmana prayed fervently to Lord Shiva. Pleased by

his devotion, Mahadev graced Lakshmana with a vision, revealing the nearby Valmiki Ashram as a safe haven for Sita. It is said that while Lakshmana received this divine blessing, Sita bathed in a nearby pond, which still exists today as the revered Sita kund. Centuries later, Raja Bakshi, recognizing the sacred significance of the location, erected a permanent temple to honor Lord Shiva. Today, the Budheshwar Mahadev Temple remains a beacon of faith, drawing countless devotees throughout the year seeking blessing and peace. Recently, the state government, acknowledging the temple's spiritual importance, allocated a generous three crore fund for its beautification, ensuring its legacy continues to inspire generations to come.

## 1.2. Understanding Commodification of Religion

According to the Oxford Dictionary of English (1989), commodification means turning something into a commodity or treating it as a commercial product, especially when it is not naturally commercial. The term "commodification" started being used in English around the 1970s, even though "commodity" has been around since the 15th century. In the work titled "Commodifying Everything: Relationship of the Market," Stasser talks about this definition and suggests there's something ordinary or commonplace about commodities [1]. Things or activities that aren't naturally commercial are considered special, and turning them into commodities can cause problems for a culture. This is particularly true for religion.

Commodification or commercialization has brought many religious traditions in trouble. It generates debates and creates tensions within religious communities and between religious authorities and the public. Indeed, the social life of any religion always encounters dilemmas. By nature, religion stands and preaches against greed and vices rooted in desire, illusion and material madness. It perpetuates Durkheimian senses of moral community centered on the sacred binding and clothing people with "feeling, emotions, and compassion as foundation of moral action" [2]. The commodification of religion is a complex phenomenon that is quietly transforming religious landscapes. As Pattana Kitiarsa (2008b) notes, religious commodification refers to the multifaceted process of turning faiths and traditions into consumable and marketable goods [3]. It entails an iterative relationship between religion and the market, involving both the market commodifying religion and religious institutions participating in consumer culture. As Kitiarsa suggests, religious commodification helps redefine religion as commodities in a spiritual marketplace.

## 1.3. Contextualizing the Studies of Commodification

The commodification of religion has complex historical and cultural roots. As Peter Ward (2006:184) notes, religious belief and practices are historically and culturally embedded. The act of turning faith elements into marketable goods is not new, but has existed across religious tradition over time. What is novel today are the technologies that facilitate global dissemination of commodified religion. Medieval European churches were funded by commodification of religion through paid masses for the dead. In America,

R. Laurence Moore describes the "growing worldliness of religion" evident over the past two centuries, especially in Protestantism. As Max Weber observed, early that burdened the poor with high financial obligations to churches [4]. This illustrated how modern market logic shaped religious life. As Susan Strasser (2003:3) asks, is there anything not subject to commodification today? Religion's aim contrasts with the profit motives driving markets, yet faith has not been immune to commercialization. According to David Loy, the post-Cold War supremacy of free markets constitutes the first true global religion binding the worldview through secular values. Market logics have penetrated and reshaped the churches.

Modernization enabled religions to reinvent themselves utilizing market mechanisms. As Robert Bellah (1970:72) stated, religion could not remain detached from modernizing forces like states and markets. Consumerism is another pillar of religious commodification. As Bishop Kenneth Carder (2001:1) critiqued, consumerism has been baptized by churches, filtering the gospel through market logic until it becomes another commodity for self-fulfillment. In Cardinal John Paul's view, consumerism, like communism, reduces people to objects serving either production or consumption ends (Conway 2006:143). This historical and theoretical grounding illustrates the academic merits in studying religious commodification. It is a complex process reshaping lived religion across the world through its relationship with capitalist markets and consumer culture. The study of one site, the Budheshwar Temple, will elucidate the concrete impacts of these global forces.

## 2. Review of Literature

Lowy, M. In this literature it was argued that capitalism has taken on religious dimensions, with commodification of objects, experience and cult of consumption [5]. According to this article capitalism is not more than a cult which is without mercy and an agreement to stop fighting for a period of time. Capitalism as a type of religion will lead an individual to a path of despair and loneliness. This article was inspired by the Weber work of Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism. Millar, Religion is called as a power which controls everything and so it has also given birth to consumer culture in religion [6]. The author traces how religion has been commodified in contemporary consumer culture through marketing, media, and merging of sacred and commercial spaces.

Carrette, King, the author examines the commodification of spirituality, yoga, meditation, and alternative therapies in late capitalist societies [7]. The author called spirituality an addiction which curbs the self-expression of someone and colonizes the mind of a person. The author is of the view that those who profit out of commodification of religion hijack the minds of people through hitting on their spirituality through different religious products. Strass, the author specifically identified the rise of "religious commodification" in the late 20th century. She explored how religious practices, goods, and experiences were increasingly marketed and consumed like any other commodity. Vries, Scott et.al, An Anthropologist, Asad offered a critical perspective on the

concept of “religious commodification,” arguing that it can oversimplify the complex relationship between religion, economics, and culture [8]. He emphasized the need to consider the diverse way in which religious communities engage with market forces. Morgan, He provides a broader perspective on the commodification of religious spaces [9]. This literature helps establish comparative frameworks that can enrich the analysis of Budheshwar Temple’s socio-economic dynamics. The “Oxford Handbook of Sociology of Religion” serves as a comprehensive resource providing theoretical framework and empirical insights into the multifaceted relationship between society and religion. Within this context, contributors explore the evolving dynamics of religious spaces, shedding light on the intricate between the sacred and secular. This seminal work offers a theoretical grounding for examining the socio-economics ramifications of commodification within religious contexts.

### 2.1. Literature Gap

There is various work done on religion, its impacts on human beings especially in western countries but very few studies have been done which focus on countries like India where the contemporary scenario is different as it was before. Nowadays religion not only satisfies the human mind and soul but also it satisfies the need and greed of street vendors,

stakeholders who are situated in the nearby Temple area. There is lack of research done on impact of commodification on lived religion in non-western sacred sites for example Uttar Pradesh. Limited focus is given on cultural dimensions of commodification. Therefore, this research aims to address through an Indian temple case study the impact of lived religion, spatial contexts, and subjective perception related to religion and its commodification.

### 2.3. Objective

To document and critically analyze the range of commercial additions and altered religious practices within the temple complex. To examine the multifaceted impacts of commodification on various stakeholders associated with the temple.

### 3. Methodology

This research is exploratory and descriptive in nature. Twenty-four respondents were taken from Budheswar Temple situated in Lucknow district of U.P. including eight priests, eight devotees, eight stakeholders to do in depth case study.

### Findings

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	11	45.8%
Somewhat Agree	9	37.5%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	8.3%
Somewhat Disagree	2	8.3%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	24	100%

**Table 1: Religious Values Shape Views Around Wealth, Poverty and Economic Equality**

Table 1: The data presented in the table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they agree that religious values shape views around wealth, poverty and economic equality. Majority of the respondents (45.8 percent)

extremely agreed with the statement. (37.5 percent) of respondents agreed. (8.3 percent) kept their stance neutral while the rest (8.3 percent) disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	13	54.2%
Somewhat Agree	5	20.8%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	0	0.0%
Somewhat Disagree	5	20.8%
Strongly Disagree	1	4.2%
Total	24	100%

**Table 2: Religious Values Shape Views Around Wealth, Poverty and Economic Equality**

Table:2 The data presented in the above table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they believe that religious beliefs influence entrepreneurship and types of businesses considered appropriate in some communities.

Majority of the respondents (54.2 percent) extremely agreed with the statement. (20.8 percent) of respondents agreed. (20.8 percent) disagreed while the rest about (4.2 percent) extremely disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	12	50%

Somewhat Agree	6	25%
Neither agree nor disagree	0	0%
Somewhat Disagree	3	12.5%
Strongly Disagree	3	12.5%
Total	24	100%

**Table 3: Religion has Become Commercialized, Turning Faith into Profit Through Merchandising and Marketing**

Table:3 The data presented in the above table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they agree that religion has commercialized, turning faith into profit through merchandising and marketing. Majority of the respondents

(50 percent) extremely agreed with the statement. (25 percent) of respondents agreed. (12.5 percent) disagreed while the rest about (12.5 percent) extremely disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	9	37.5%
Somewhat Agree	7	29.2%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	8.3%
Somewhat Disagree	5	20.8%
Strongly Disagree	1	4.2%
Total	24	100%

**Table 4: Many Modern Preachers Prioritize Increasing Profits Over Sharing Spiritual Messages**

Table 4: The data presented in the above table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they believe that many modern preachers prioritize increasing profits over sharing spiritual messages. Majority of the respondents

(37.5 present) extremely agreed with the statement. (29.2 percent) of respondents agreed. (8.3 percent) kept their stance neutral. (20.8 percent) disagreed while the rest (4.2 percent) extremely disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	11	45.8%
Somewhat Agree	5	20.8%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	12.5%
Somewhat Disagree	4	16.7%
Strongly Disagree	1	4.2%
Total	24	100%

**Table 5: Religious Rituals are Increasingly Commercialized and Turned into Performative Shows Rather Than Retaining Solemnity**

Table:5 The data presented in the above table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they agree that religious rituals are increasingly commercialized and turned into performative shows rather than retaining solemnity. Majority of the respondents (45.8 percent) extremely agreed

with the statement. (20.8 percent) of the respondents agreed. (20.8 percent) of the respondents disagreed. (25.5 percent) kept their stance neutral while the rest (4.2percent) extremely disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	7	29.2%
Somewhat Agree	10	41.7%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	12.5%
Somewhat Disagree	3	12.5%
Strongly Disagree	1	4.2%
Total	24	100%

**Table 6: Commodification Brings Socio-Economic Benefits for the Local Community**

Table:6 The data presented in the above table records the response of the respondents when asked if they believe that commodification brings socio-economic benefits for the local community. Majority of the respondents (41.7 percent)

agreed with the statement. (29.2 percent) of the respondents extremely agreed. (12.5percent) kept their stance neutral. (12.5 percent) of the respondents disagreed while the rest (4.2 percent) extremely disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	7	29.2%
Somewhat Agree	9	37.5%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	8.3%
Somewhat Disagree	6	25%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	24	100%

**Table 7: Religious Rules about Food & Rituals Affect Consumer Spending & Sales Cycle**

Table:7 The data presented in the above table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they agree that religious rules about food and rituals affect consumer spending and sales cycle. Majority of the respondents (37.5

percent) agreed with the statement. (29.2 percent) of the respondents extremely agreed. (8.3 percent) kept their stance neutral while the rest (25 percent) disagreed.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	13	54.2%
Somewhat Agree	7	29.2%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3	12.5%
Somewhat Disagree	1	4.2%
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0%
Total	24	100%

**Table 8: Commodification of Religion has Impacted Authenticity of the Spiritual Experience for the Worshippers**

Table:8 The data presented in the above table records the responses of the respondents when asked if they agree that commodification of religion has impacted authenticity of the spiritual experience for worshippers. Majority of the respondents (54.2 percent) extremely agreed with the statement. (29.2 percent) of the respondents agreed. (12.5percent) kept their stance neutral while the rest (4.2 percent) disagreed.

owners readily acknowledge their dependency on the temple economy and related crowds. In contrast, lay devotees and spiritual leaders were more ambivalent, weighing potential benefits against risks of corrupting religious values. They worried commercialization could divert focus away from the true meaning and purpose of practices. Affluent devotees accepted commodification as inevitable, while the poor felt marginalized and priced out.

#### 4. Discussion

A key finding is that most devotees believe commodification has detracted from the authenticity and spiritual significance of religious rituals, symbols and spaces. 75 percent felt it strongly impacted the essence of shared worship and meaning derived. They differentiate between economic sustenance of temples and exploitative commercialization of faith. Many worry temples are morphing into business corporations, with scandals around misused donations diminishing public trust. Respondents argued true devotion stems from inner realms of meaning, which gets diluted by excessive external commercial preoccupations.

However, a few contended skilful blending of the spiritual and worldly could retain authenticity, for instance, eco-friendly souvenirs spreading messages versus mass-produced trinkets. Overall, devotees make nuanced distinctions between acceptable and objectionable forms of commodification based on intention and context. Many called for greater transparency and oversight to protect sanctity amidst commercial forces. Religious authorities and businessmen held the most positive views of commodification, emphasizing economic benefits, livelihoods sustained, preservation of faith beyond the temple walls, and adapting with the times. Small business

These findings reveal a spectrum of outlooks, often correlated with one's relationship to commodification processes. However, most agree unregulated commercialization poses concerns, calling for nuanced reforms to harness benefits while limiting adverse impact. This highlights the need for inclusive dialogue between diverse stakeholders to negotiate commodification thoughtfully. Data reveals widespread agreement that commodification and commercialization of religion have advanced over time at Budheshwar Temple. 75 percent of respondents strongly agreed that religion has become commercialized through marketing and merchandising. Many noted practices like selling prasad, branding the trade, marketing religious symbols, outsourcing rituals, and using faith as an emotional appeal for donations as evidence of commodification. The proliferation of religious souvenir shops, corporate sponsorship, and advertising around temple events further signify commercialization. According to devotees, these changes accelerated in the past 15-20 years with rising wealth, consumerism, and media proliferation. However, some argue commodification processes are not wholly new but rather modern mutations of patronage, gift-giving, and economic sustenance of temples historically. Most agree that commodification has steadily increased over generations, rising concerns about impacts on religious meaning.



#### 4.1. Significance of the Study

This paper will provide original empirical insights into the under-researched processes of religious commodification occurring in non-western sacred sites like Indian Temples. The Budheshwar Temple represents an important case demonstrating the relationships between market forces, religious authorities, devotees and local communities. Examining diverse perspectives allows greater understanding of the multifaceted impacts of commodification on sacred spaces. This research will contribute to sociological theory on commodification of religion and inform debates on preserving spiritual authenticity.

#### 4.2. Scope and Limitations

The study is geographically limited to a single temple site, which allows an in-depth investigation but cannot provide generalized findings. The sample of twenty-four respondents, while diverse, cannot represent all possible viewpoints [10-12].

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the complex, multifaceted impacts of commodification on a religious site. Commercialization generates socio-economic opportunities yet also risks serving sacred meanings from rituals and community. Nuanced negotiations between spiritual and worldly realms become vital for temples to sustain public trust and relevance in modern society. The Budheshwar case highlights the need to balance pragmatic concessions to the marketplace with retaining focus on faith's inner transformative essence. With sensitivity leadership and inclusive dialog, temples can maintain their distinctive spiritual role amidst inevitable change that comes from within, while adapting wisely to changing outer conditions.

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