

A study of the renewal of the Kalkaji Mandir temple complex and the buildings around it, compared with the recently constructed Akshardhām Mandir.

## Sacred architectures as monuments: a study of the Kalkaji Mandir, Delhi

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This article considers the relationship between architecture, bodies, and custodies in the making of Indian urban monuments. Monuments are created through a combination of design and designation. In this article I explore a religious architecture that is dynamic and iterative and at which monumental designation was attempted and quickly abandoned. I align three issues: what a monument looks like, what a monument does, and how both design and function connect to the custodian regimes at monumental, or potentially monumental, sites. In particular, I am concerned with architectures of divinity, and devotion, as both quotidian and monumental aspects of a city.

Hindu shrines – the abodes of gods – proliferate across India. These structures take a variety of forms, from simple arrangements of *murtis* (gods) beneath tree canopies to multipurpose complexes stretching across acres. The organisational infrastructures that maintain the fabric of these shrines range from local, informal groups of devotees to multinational corporations that wield considerable financial and political capital. This article examines one temple complex in Southern Delhi, the Kalkaji Mandir, and considers the relationship between the architectural form of the temple, the buildings around it, and the nature of prevailing authority, custody, and occupation. Interview and documentation work was carried out at the Kalkaji Mandir over several years, from 2011 onwards. This research paid particular attention to the replacement of the cladding on the central shrine, carried out as *jheernodharan* (sacred renewal) and the changing occupation of the *dharamsalas*, or guesthouses, around the complex.

The Kalkaji Mandir complex, I argue, is a living assemblage that contains, within its fabric, architectural fragments that connect it to the broader frames of Delhi's urban history. The social and physical complexity of the Kalkaji Mandir site render it unamenable to the conventional expectations of monumentality, and draws our attention to how narrow and specific those expectations are. I argue that the site also offers insights into the relationship between complex regimes of ownership and custody and the physical fabrics that those regimes generate

and animate. The Akshardhām Mandir in Eastern Delhi is employed as a counterpoint to consider the relationship between architecture, monumentality, and devotional orders. A self-styled Hindu monument, the Akshardhām complex was constructed between 2000 and 2005 and designed to be a monumental articulation of a particular national devotional and cultural heritage. For all its architectural richness and incessant public access, successive architectural surveys of the city have deemed the Kalkaji Mandir to be an unimportant monument and have taken only brief notice of its form and characteristics. The Kalkaji is a living, dynamic fabric generated by *jheernodharan*, continuing cycles of physical renewal, and changing patterns of both custody and occupation. The Akshardhām Mandir, in contrast, was designed and fabricated as a monumental architecture by a single organisation and has been integrated into the urban fabric of Delhi as a significance sacred and public monument. I suggest that the measure of monumental architecture, in the comparison of the Kalkaji and Akshardhām, lies in the latter site's amenability to particular types of public access and its deliberate alignment to quite specific expressions of Hindu nationalism and political patronage.

### The shrine of Kalkaji

Kalkaji Mandir is a Saivite (devoted to the worship of the god Shiva), mother-goddess shrine complex spread over thirty-five acres in southern Delhi. The mandir sits on top of a small hill, which has been a centre for devotional activity for millennia.<sup>1</sup> The splendour of the Kalkaji Mandir is as the abode of Kalka, a folk goddess assimilated into the Hindu pantheon as an aspect of the goddesses Durga and Kali. In the temple's origin myth, Kalka emerged from the eyebrows of Kushki Devi, a goddess sent by Parvati to defeat two troublesome giants. After the goddesses' victory, Kalka settled at the site of the battle and has been worshipped there for thousands of years.<sup>2</sup> The central shrine was rebuilt in the mid-nineteenth century and provided with *dharamsalas* (guest houses), donated by wealthy devotees to *pujaris* (priests) for pilgrims attending the two annual fairs held at the site.



1 The central shrine, c. 1905

2 The approach to the shrine, 2012.

3 Blocked archway, Sooklee Dharamsala, 2012.

A photograph taken of the central shrine at Kalkaji at the beginning of the twentieth century, most probably during the surveys that preceded the creation of the new city, makes evident the transformation experienced by the shrine during the twentieth century [1]. The mandir grew in popularity during the twentieth century with the establishment of the new Imperial city of Delhi in the 1920s and the city's exponential growth during the Second World War, and after the Partition of India in 1947. The site was one of four camps established in Delhi for 'non-Muslim' refugees during the cataclysmic migrations that followed the creation of India and Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> Pujaris at the mandir filed a petition in 1950 against the continuing occupation of buildings around the central shrine by the three hundred families still resident. The petition complained that the refugees had destroyed *chabutras* (platforms), slaughtered animals, taken and damaged *murtis*, killed birds fed by devotees, cut down trees, were keeping cattle in the *dharamsalas*, and threatened to kill anyone who questioned them.<sup>4</sup> The physical changes wrought by the site's use as a refugee camp have been submerged in successive structural and social changes. The central shrine is now surrounded by a dense complex of shrines, stalls, office spaces, and *dharamsalas*, described below. The path to the Kalkaji Mandir is lined with stalls selling snacks, trinkets, sindoor (the red powder worn by married Hindu women), images, and offerings [2]. There are tattoo artists, music stalls, a small fairground for children, and three photographic studios that offer the chance to have a photograph taken with images or models of the goddess, giving space, light, and license that are not



4 Mother goddess raised mural, 2013.

5 Alcove Muqarna tessellation, Kalkaji entrance, 2012.



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afforded within the enclosed central shrine.

The site is one of bewilderingly complex and rich materiality. The Kalkaji Mandir is full of architectural fragments, often partially hidden beneath the dynamic devotional environment of the shrine complex. Buildings works, small and large, ongoing and incomplete, draped fabrics and *dias* (oil lamps) proliferate across the environs of the temple. Decorative, curved archways speak of substantial donations and more illustrious occupation than the fragile tenancies that are discussed later in this article [3]. Fragments of frescos and murals are preserved within the complex, structural palimpsest. Painted murals and relief frescos chart the assimilation of Kalka as Durga, in the first decades of the twentieth century, in both two and three dimensions [4]. The Kalkaji complex is also one of many architectures in Delhi that bear traces of Mughal decoration. A small painted *muqarna* tessellation appears on the interior of an alcove on the southeastern entrance to the shrine [5]. This design, used commonly in entrances, is a variant of the Mughal design used to decorate curved walls and alcoves all over northern India and Pakistan [6]. Two of the other temples in Delhi that might once have incorporated Mughal design motifs – the Jogmaya temple in Mehrauli and the Hanumanji temple near Connaught Place – have been rebuilt to obliterate, or at least obscure, successive structural phases.

The Kalkaji Mandir appears only rarely in the colonial archive or in historical accounts of the city and its architecture. The mandir is mentioned briefly in the surveys of Delhi's historic buildings, which began to appear from the mid-nineteenth century. The mandir was noted in Syed Ahmed Khan's account of the monuments of Delhi *Asār-us-Sanadīd* (*The Remnants of Ancient Heroes*), published in 1847 and 1854. The mosque is also documented in Carr's *Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi* published in 1867 and in the fourth volume of Zafar Hasan's encyclopaedic account of Delhi's monuments and antiquities published in 1920. The mandir is mentioned in *Delhi and its Environs*, a guide republished by the Archaeological Survey of India several times since its first edition in 1964. The guide describes the temple as 'of no architectural importance'. More recently, Lucy

Peck's important survey of architecture in Delhi describes 'the revolting squalor' of the temple and gives more space to a summary of the mythical origins of the temple, derived from Hasan's *Monuments of Delhi*, than to its architecture.<sup>5</sup>

Kalkaji's marginalisation from Delhi's monumental order reflects a longer history of archaeological custody and curation of monuments. Selected and landscaped monuments were carefully integrated into the planning and creation of the new imperial capital in the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> The photograph taken of the central shrine at the beginning of the twentieth century [1 refers] was most likely part of the assessments of the Delhi's conservable past ahead of the new imperial city's construction, though the site was never singled out for attention as a potential public monument. The selection of monuments for New Delhi reflected imperial, aesthetic preferences for Islamicate architecture, the symmetry and simplicity of which was considered to be more pleasing and more amenable to restorative conservation work. By comparison, the Hindu monument, identified with the medieval Nagara form, was defined by the richness, and sensuality, of its stone carving making it less amenable to structural restoration.<sup>7</sup> When lists were prepared of buildings that would be protected from demolition during land acquisition and clearance from 1913 onwards, Hindu temples were shifted from the first iteration of historic monuments to be preserved in situ to a second list of significant religious buildings, whose preservation was deemed prudent in relation to native sensibilities and not in terms of inherent architectural or historic worth.<sup>8</sup>



6 Archway tessellation at Badshahi Masjid, Lahore, Pakistan.

7 Inlaid marble cladding being put in place around the central shrine, 2012.

8 Detail of engraved sandstone pillar, central shrine, during *jheernodharan*, 2012.



The imperial Archaeological Department particularly deplored the tendency for Hindu temples, once they came to the attention of conservators as monuments, to be subject to renewed devotion.<sup>9</sup> *Jeernodharan*, the sacred renewal of damaged or decayed parts of the temple fabric of temples, transgressed the principles of architectural conservation of monuments that had been comprehensively established in 1923 by John Marshall, Director General of Archaeology in India between 1902 and 1928. Marshall's code of conservation was designed to create carefully curated monuments that were set apart from, and arguably rescued from, India's present and conserved according to their original design principles and, implicitly, to the taste of British architects and archaeologists.

The central shrine of the Kalkaji Mandir has been subject to two recent *jheernodharans*, one in the 1980s and the other thirty years later, between 2012 and 2018, that coincided with my own research at the site. During that *jheernodharan*, the central shrine was reclad in white marble, inlaid with decorative stonework, brought from Kishangarh in Rajasthan [7].

The choice of white marble is significant. Historically associated with Jain shrines in Rajasthan and high-status Mughal structures, machine-cut white marble has become immensely popular in the taste of middle-class India. The marble sheets, with small areas of relief carving and inlay, replace an earlier layer of grey and white marble tiles in which the central shrine was clad in 1988.<sup>10</sup> The carved sandstone of the circular shrine, tentatively dated to the mid-nineteenth

century, was briefly made visible during the renovations [8]. In 2012, when I spoke to Mr Raghu, who co-ordinated the renovations, he made clear that a conservation of the original sandstone architecture was considered but was abandoned as being too costly.<sup>11</sup> As the *jheernodharan* progressed, flat marble panels have been fitted to the pillars and to the cusped arches; a false plaster ceiling has been fitted within and the curved recesses covered with sheets of aluminium leaving spaces for wiring and fittings for cameras, speakers, and lights. The original plans for the *jheernodharan* included the coverage of the dome of the mandir with gold-plated brass, a stage of renovation that was abandoned.

**Dharamsalas**

The central shrine is surrounded by *dharamsalas* (guest houses) that have been subject to contingent, episodic structural change for over a century. Originally built from donations for the support of *pujari* families, the *dharamsalas* form an interlinked, overlapping set of spaces and occupations; some are derelict, some are permanently occupied by families, while others are inhabited temporarily by groups of migrant labourers. The *dharamsalas*' dedication plaques and architecture embody the site's links to the urban history of Delhi: to the commercial riches of Chandni Chowk in the north; the Partition (during which refugees were accommodated in the *dharamsalas*) and the contemporary currents of migration, urban property, and poverty. The *dharamsalas* were built around the temple from the 1820s onwards by 'Hindu bankers and merchants of Delhi' soon after Mirza Raja Kedranath, Peshkar of Akbar the Second, had donated funds for the construction of a dome over the central shrine.<sup>12</sup> The *dharamsalas* are full of architectural fragments and glimpses. Tentatively datable architectural fragments show late-Mughal and colonial design motifs, painted murals and relief frescos, decorative archways and stone and *lakhori* brick<sup>13</sup> and plaster columns [9, 10]. The architecture of the *dharamsalas* reflect changing decorative and structural idioms and evidence their gradual impoverishment. Plaques document donor dedications of the *dharamsalas* in Hindi, Farsi, Sanskrit, Urdu, and occasionally English. The earliest visible plaque is a high-quality Farsi inscription, deliberately left visible by subsequent structural additions, dating to 1845 [11]. The *dharamsalas* are social and architectural palimpsests; spaces in which the exigencies and integrity of everyday lives are part of a fabric created and modified over 150 years.

The complex, fragmental architectures of the *dharamsalas* reflect the complex nature of their custody and occupation. The *dharamsalas* were originally built as donations by wealthy devotees to support *pujaris* (priests), and ownership of the *dharamsalas* is universally acknowledged to remain with their descendants. Some of the *dharamsalas* are locked and some are decrepit. The majority are occupied by individuals, families and groups of single, male labourers who pay extremely low (by the standards of New Delhi) rents to the *pujari* proprietors [12]. The naming of the *dharamsalas* provides clues to



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9 Doorway and lakhori brick dome, Sooklee Dharamsala, 2011.

10 Decorative plaster archways, Ajay Dharamsala, 2011.

11 Farsi inscription, 1845.

their layered history of function and inhabitation. Originally known by the dedications of their patrons, the *dharamsalas* became numbered quarters assigned to refugees by the Camp Commandant during the occupation of the mandir site as a refugee camp.<sup>14</sup> The *dharamsalas* are now numbered for the purposes of postal delivery and named by, and after, their occupants. The oldest occupant of the Sooklee Dharamsala claimed in 2012 to have lived there for thirty years. In 2016, when I returned to the *dharamsala*, the elderly couple were gone, and had been replaced by a group of young men.<sup>15</sup>

Naming says much about the relationship between the social ownership and structural fabric of the Kalkaji Mandir complex. As I navigated and attempted to map the *dharamsalas* in an early visit, Vishal was given as the name of the *dharamsala* immediately behind the Farsi inscription dating from 1845 [11]. The woman who occupied the upper levels of the *dharamsala* with her family then introduced me to her husband, Vishal [13]. Vishal had come from Banda in Uttar Pradesh as a labourer and, after accommodation at the *dharamsala* was arranged by an elder from his village, had lived there for twenty-five years.<sup>16</sup> Vishal Dharamsala is written in Roman script on the stairs leading to the courtyard of the *dharamsala* and in Devanagri script within the courtyard [14]. The *dharamsalas* represent living assemblages; the fabric, toponymies, and function of which are subject are subject to change and adaptation.

#### Authority and sacred architectures

The overlapping and intersecting spaces at the Kalkaji complex are organised and controlled through an intricate overlapping patchwork of usage and custody. The control of the ritual functions of the shrine and of the voluminous offerings made to Kalkaji is divided between two principal groups: the Brahman *pujaris* and the ascetic Jogis.<sup>17</sup> The rights of the *pujari* families at the shrine are arranged according to a complex *baridar* (turn-taking) system, control of which is claimed by two committees that co-exist at the site: the Sri Sidpeeth Ma Kalkaji Mandir Committee (The Sacred Mother Goddess Kalkaji Temple Committee) and the Sri Kalkaji Mandir Parbandak Sudhar (The Kalkaji Temple Reform Committee). The *bari* (turn) of each family to oversee *pujas* (devotional rituals) and control the income from donations is set according to a calendar of entitlement giving each family one month in the temple every three to six years.<sup>18</sup> These rights may in turn be leased to other *pujaris* if the *baridar* is unable or unwilling to take their turn.<sup>19</sup> The *baridari* system has successfully accommodated the generational growth of the *baridar* claimants. The system appears in one of the rare interventions of the colonial state at the temple's affairs. In 1940 and 1941, an official attended the 'Kalsa' ceremonies – the preliminary rituals of each successive *baridar* – after competing parties of *pujaris* warned that a dispute to the rights over the incomes of the temple might lead to a breach of the peace. In neither case, however, was any disturbance reported.<sup>20</sup> Aside from this brief intervention, the imperial state had little, if any, reason to interest itself in the shrine.



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12 Day labourers occupy the Ajay Dharamsala, 2012.

13 Vishal and his family at Vishal Dharamsala, 2012.

14 The steps leading to Vishal Dharamsala, 2012.

A police presence was provided during the two annual fairs and the Delhi government made an annual donation of Rs5 to the *pujaris* who oversaw the *Chaitra* fair that took place in March or April.<sup>21</sup> Currently, state authority is manifest in a permanent police post, staffed by two affable constables, in case of a crush, theft, or disturbance.<sup>22</sup>

The *jheernodaran* initiated in 2012 was funded by donations and controlled by a committee of devotees, entirely separate from the *pujaris*, or from either of the two management committees, and who recognised only the authority and guidance of Kalkama. When I spoke to head of the renovation committee, Mr Raghu, about the *jheernodaran* being carried out, he repeatedly asked me not to pass on any information to either of the temple committees about the repairs. He did not dispute the authority of the

Bharadwaj *pujaris*, but emphasised that the devotional attentions of his own committee were entirely independent from them.<sup>23</sup>

In 2011, the custodial regime at Kalkaji came into contact with state bureaucracy once again when the Delhi State Archaeological Department attempted to list the Kalkaji Mandir as a registered monument under the terms of the 1958 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act. The notification of any structure as a monument requires a notice to be posted at the site that invites any interested parties to claim their rights of custody or ownership. These right-holders are then included in discussions about the obligations that monumental notification would entail and are officially recognised in the formal notification of the site as a protected monument. At the mandir, the preliminary notice drew such a complex constellation of responses that the department withdrew the notice and abandoned the planned notification as impracticable. I argue that what the Archaeological Department saw as an irreconcilable tangle of claims is in fact a custodial regime that, while complex, is stable and significant. The co-existence of discrete and exclusive rights that are claimed by different groups over the same resources and entitlements renders systematic documentation of custody near impossible. However, incompatibility with the strictures of bureaucratic order does not mean that authority at the temple has no operative logic. Equilibrium at Kalkaji appears to be maintained by, and not in spite of, the uncertainty and ambiguity of rights.

These rights coexist precisely because they are never articulated simultaneously, not least because all claims to the attributes of the site defer to the sovereign authority of the goddess Kalka. Information about the renovation of the shrine is kept within the renovations committee with no involvement or communication with the *pujari* committees. The banners of both committees that oversee *pujari* rights are displayed prominently near the central shrine. This mutual discretion ensures that ostensibly exclusive claims can co-exist. Stability is maintained by holding information appropriately, within specific spheres of relevance. Any attempt to fully disclose, compare, and calculate would be a direct questioning of the bounty of Kalka-ma. Although the principle of the *pujaris'* pre-eminent rights is consistently restated, they do not go unchallenged. There is a web of litigations in Delhi courts over rights at the mandir. Space for the stalls which line the walkways to the principal shrine are rented from *pujari* families but rents are now paid to the courts after the stall holders filed suits protesting about the level of rents demanded by the *pujaris*.<sup>24</sup> One of the management committees is in dispute with the Delhi Development Authority over land around the temple, and a number of court cases are ongoing over the rights of the Bharadwaj *pujaris* to increase the cost of rents of the many small stalls at the site. However, injunctions tend to have the effect of further separating different parties and, in particular, of limiting the ability of *pujaris* to articulate and exercise the property rights, which all agree they possess.

This palimpsest of custody resonates with the material complexity of the temple complex. The materials of the temple are a complex fabric of overlapping pasts and presents that remain unamenable to the static order of monumental custody. Although the site cannot be transformed into an obedient monument, the fragmented and contested nature of authority at the Kalkaji has profound significance for the survival of the existing architectural palimpsest. The Sri Kalkaji Mandir Parbandak Sudhar, the 'reformist' management committee, have filed a suit to have the *dharamsalas* around the temple destroyed and commissioned an architectural map to document the areas designated for removal [15]. Their aim is to remove the occupants, clearing away an area of one hundred metres around the shrine. The area cleared would then be used to provide 'public utilities' to the devotees. This reorganisation would, to borrow from Sanjay Srivastava's analysis of middle-class urban aspiration, create a 'clean' space around the shrine in the hope that a more orderly architecture would impose orderly public comportment in and around the shrine.<sup>25</sup> The destruction would also result in the loss of the oldest and most structurally complex architecture on the site. Given the complex arrangement of occupation, custody, and authority at the site, and the proliferation of litigation that exists between different interests, it is unlikely that the Parbandak Sudhar's ambition will be realised. However, the ambition speaks to an emergent middle-class aesthetic for more open and orderly sacred architectures.

#### Devotion and entertainment at Akshardhām

The ambition to remodel the complex is arguably an attempt to emulate the organisation of space at another, much newer, sacred space in the city. The Akshardhām Cultural Complex in West Delhi, opened in 2005, has quickly become one of the city's most significant sacred monuments [16]. The one-hundred acre Akshardhām complex is one of a number of temple sites created since the 1990s by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha from donations derived from international networks of Gujarati Vaishnavite devotion.<sup>26</sup> Akshardhām is dedicated to Swamynarayan, an ascetic guru (1781–1830) now celebrated as a divine incarnation by his followers. The land for the complex includes twenty-three acres of the trans-Yamuna floodplain, a controversial and contested land appropriation that was expedited through high-level political patronage. Kavita Singh's comprehensive and insightful account of the Akshardhām complex sets out its co-ordination of culture, consumption, and devotion.<sup>27</sup> The temple site combines devotional, museological, didactic, and entertainment facilities in a manner that blurs boundaries between sacred and secular pursuits. Indeed, its multifunctional character echoes the variety of occupations found at the Kalkaji site. Here, however, the similarity ends. Visitors to the Akshardhām complex are carefully stewarded between the clearly spatially demarcated zones of the



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complex (shrines, gardens, exhibitions, the food court, and book shop), their mobile phones are removed and their comportment is policed. Notices proliferate that remind visitors of how to behave.

In contrast, bodies at the central shrine at Kalkaji are physically contained by barriers: metal bars divide the path towards the principal entrance to the shrine and police barricades block doors into the shrine. Beyond these tangible restraints, and within the relatively small spaces available in the circumambulatory passage and between the *dharamshalas*, devotees direct their own movement in negotiation with the *pujaris*, stallholders and other devotees. Bodies are free to touch, lean, and sit around the central shrine; offerings of food are pushed into the mouths of the Goddess, strings are tied, and *dias* lit. The Akshardhām complex, funded through an international network of devotees, was designed as a single, multifunctional complex. The complex is architecturally elaborate, abounding in intricate carvings and sculpture and splendid in its cleanliness and order. In contrast to the conspicuous and obtrusive *jheernodharan* at Kalkaji, its upkeep is discrete and unobtrusive.

The construction and patronage of the Akshardhām Mandir reflects the social redemption of the Hindu temple by upper-class, urban Hindu populations since the 1990s.<sup>28</sup> However, that redemption has had uneven effects in the status of two Delhi temples under discussion. Both the Kalkaji and Akshardhām sites have been provided metro stations, a transport infrastructure that began in 1998, which has transformed movement around the city.<sup>29</sup> While the Kalkaji metro station, adjacent to the temple complex, facilitates the arrival of devotees, that temple sits in a densely populated area of South Delhi. The provision of a metro station for the Akshardhām reflects the carefully planned integration of the structure and its environs as a tourist monument, long before the city expanded eastwards across the Yamuna River. Akshardhām's recognition and promotion as a monument was integral to its creation. The Akshardhām temple-monument is celebrated on Delhi tourism notice boards across the city and has established itself as a 'Travellers' Choice Landmark' on Tripadvisor and is currently ranked as the #1 of Delhi's 'Sights & Landmarks', 'Sacred & Religious Sites', and 'Gardens

15 Architect's plan of the site prepared for the redevelopment project.

& Parks'.<sup>30</sup> While the Kalkaji complex has a history as part of the changing urban fabric of the city and despite the architectural significance of its central, circular shrine, the temple complex remains very much a part of the city's everyday fabric: crowded, unkempt, dynamic, and vibrant.

The Akshardhām complex orchestrates and links three principal visions for its devotional and tourist visitors devotion to the Swaminarayan sect; a more generalised constellation of Hinduism; and broader national history. The temple is an argument in architecture, a didactic assertion that Hinduism is the definitive iteration of Indian faith and culture. The Akshardhām complex stands apart from and bears little resemblance to the proliferation of temples in Delhi, large and small. Instead, it sits within broader national, and international, frames of the politics of Hindutva (Hindu-ness). Hindutva, coined by Hindu nationalist Vinayak Savarkar in 1923, describes a nationalism that prioritised Hinduism, and a singularised Hindu identity, as the definitive identity of India.<sup>31</sup>

In 2007, the monument at the centre of the Akshardhām complex was recognised by the Guinness World Records as the 'largest Hindu temple structure' in the world.<sup>32</sup> This recognition, which is both singular and banal, speaks to the monumental ambition of the complex's design. Publicity at and about the Akshardhām's static and (save for its scale) insignificant architecture, foregrounds, even revels, in an accountancy of its construction as proof of its monumentality: the 'mandir reaches 141.3 feet into the sky, spans 316 feet in width, and is 356 feet long'. The website for the temple and visitor guides present the visitor with aggregates; enumerating pillars (234), statues (20,000) and domes (17).<sup>33</sup> The Akshardhām's monumentality is measured not by the quality, originality, or significance of its architecture but by its magnitude and scope as a 'showcase [...] of Indian art, wisdom, heritage and values'.<sup>34</sup>

The very different lives of the two sites speak volumes about the architectural parameters of the monumental within a dynamic urban environment. The Kalkaji Mandir is a living and



evolving architectural palimpsest that has attracted little scholarly or popular documentation. The material and social fabric of the central shrine and its dynamic environs can only be known through firsthand encounters. The Akshardhām, in contrast, is curated and amplified through its website and digital tourist guides. The character of authority at each site is reflected in its architectural fabric. At Kalkaji the fragmented, though functional, authoritative order of temple management is manifest in the site's complex physical order. At Akshardhām the unified nature of the project has created a physical fabric that is equally monolithic.

The dynamic potential of divine energy at any shrine site can accommodate multiple claims (beginning with the negotiated balance of divine sovereignty and earthly custody). This renders the fixing of the material attributes of any temple – whether through physical conservation or legislative arbitrations of occupation and management – a persistent challenge to conservationist or legislative regimes. At Kalkaji, the absolute sovereignty of the goddess Kalka occupies a pre-eminent and undisputed apex beneath which co-exists a proliferation of custodial claims. At Akshardhām, this dynamic potential has been precluded by the creation of an obedient, monumental architecture within an orderly Hindu divinity.

## Conclusion

Complex material palimpsests are an aspect of any dense, urban environment. Monuments protected by state, and non-state, authority tend to sit apart from that complex landscape and instead embody spaces and structures that are set outside, spatially and temporally, the quotidian order of the city. At Kalkaji, the absence of central authority or curatorial ambition has yielded a complex fabric of materials, which however fascinating, is dissonant with the dominant aesthetics of monumental curation. As it currently exists, the site is also at odds with an emerging, Indian order of sacred monumentality that accommodates neither fragmentation or ambiguity. Kalkaji Mandir demonstrates the capacity of sacred architectures to accommodate a range of interests, each one of them making a simultaneous claim to pre-eminence. There is no monumental façade at Kalkaji but the palimpsest of social and sacred authority at the site has served to protect valuable architectural fragments.

I would argue that the Kalkaji Mandir complex offers the potential to merge the monumental into the everyday order' to create complex spaces in which any public gaze must necessarily work a little harder to understand the space and in which the alternating gaze of devotion and leisure are rendered comfortably dissonant.

## Notes

1. Dilip Chakrabarti, 'The Archaeology of Hinduism', in *Archaeology and World Religion*, ed. by Timothy Insoll (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 33–45.
2. 'Millions of years ago, the gods who dwelt in the neighbourhood of the present temple were troubled by two giants and were compelled to prefer their complaint to Brahma, "the god of all". But Brahma declined to interfere, and referred them to the goddess Parbathi. Out of the mouth of Parbathi sprung Kushki Devi, who attacked the giants and slaughtered them, but it so happened, that as their blood fell on the dry earth thousands of giants came into life, and the battle was maintained by Kushki Devi against great odds. Parbathi took compassion on her offspring and out of the eyebrows of Kushki Devi came the monster Kali Devi, "whose lip rested on the hills below and the upper lip touched the sky above"; she drank the blood of the slaughtered giants as it poured out of their wounds; and the goddesses obtained a complete victory over their enemies. About 5,000 years ago, Kali Devi fixed her abode here, and she was worshipped as the chief divinity of the place.' Stephen Carr, *Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi* (1876; repr. Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1967), p. 27. Quoted in *Monuments of Delhi: Lasting Splendour of the Great Mughals and others. Volume IV: Badarpur Zail, etc.*, ed. by Maulvi Zafar Hasan and J. A. Page (1920; repr. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2008), p. 9.
3. The others being Kingsway Camps: Wavell Canteen Transit Camp and Willingdon Aerodrome Transit Camp.
4. Many of whom had already been allotted land in Rohtak (now in the State of Haryana) but some family members remained at the mandir. See: Petition, 10 November 1949, Complaint against refugees residing at Kalkaji Camp, Deputy Commissioner's Office, General Branch, File No. 333, 1949, DSA. Pujaris complained, for example, that two shrines had been occupied by refugees, one by Kanshi Ram s/o Dattu Ram and eight members of his family who placed a charpoy over the 'Moorti of Shiviji'. Hargain Singh, police report, 28 November 1949, Complaint against refugees residing at Kalkaji Camp, Deputy Commissioner's Office, General Branch, File No. 333, 1949, DSA.
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8. H. C. Beadon, Dep. Commissioner, Delhi District to A. Meredith, Commissioner and Superintendent, Delhi Division, 27 May 1912, Preservation of certain monuments in New Imperial City, DC File No. 44, 1912; Memo, 'List of Religious Buildings under Notified Acquisition Area and Orders etc. on Miscellaneous Buildings', DC File No. 15, 1912, DSA.
9. Indira Sengupta, 'Monument Preservation and the Vexing Question of Religious Structures in Colonial India', in *From Plunder to Preservation: Britain and the Heritage of*

- Empire, c. 1800–1940*, ed. by Astrid Swenson and Peter Mandler (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press/British Academy, 2013), pp. 171–85; also see Sutton, 'Devotion, Antiquity and Colonial Custody'.
10. A plaque records 'the restoration of the temple in marble' by Shri Mahan Sohan Shah ji Maharaj of Yamuna Bazar, Delhi, 'according to the auspicious moment', [corresponding to] 24 March 1988. The cost of the renovation, including materials and labour, is estimated to be Rs500 per square foot.
  11. Interview with Mr Raghu, 5 January 2012.
  12. Carr, *Archaeology and Monumental Remains of Delhi*, p. 27.
  13. Lakhori bricks are red, burnt clay formed into a distinctive thin, flat shape, were widely used from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and are a key characteristic of Mughal architecture.
  14. Complaint against refugees residing at Kalkaji Camp, Deputy Commissioner's Office, General Branch, File No. 333, 1949, DSA.
  15. The Sooklee Dharamsala's current occupant has lived there for thirty years; the Bhisala Dharamsala for twenty-five years. Interviews conducted at the dharamsalas, 5, 8 January 2011.
  16. Conversation with Vishal and his family, 5 January 2011.
  17. According to lore, a group of Jogis approached Emperor Akbar and asked him for a share of the temple income. Akbar divided the income of the temple, giving 25% to the Jogis and 75% to the Pujaris. In the received version of this narrative the emperor is Akbar I (1542–1605), son of Humayun, though if the story has foundation in fact, it is more likely to have been Akbar Shah II (1760–1837), whose reign was coterminous with the rise of the earliest extant elements of the architectural complex.
  18. The Jogis divided into the Pandeys and Naths and control the income of the temple for three months every year. Estimates given to me of how many families of pujaris exist in Chirag Delhi varied between 365 and 2,000, though the lower figure appears to be the more accurate. The pujaris themselves operate on a rotation system, taking turns to perform puja and collect a share of the donations. The donations were estimated to be between Rs2–3,000 on weekdays, Rs5,000 on a Sunday and approximately c. 80–5 lakhs a month. The daily figure was given by Dr Bharadwaj, interview, 18 January 2012. The monthly figure was given by Satish Bharadwaj, interview, 24 January 2012.
  19. Satish Bharadwaj, Chairman of the Sri Kalkaji Mandir Parbandak Sudhar, interview, 24 January 2012.
  20. Disputes between the three contesting parties of Pujaris of Kalkaji Mandir on the income of the temple and the Deputy Commissioner's Decision thereto, Deputy Commissioner's Office, 29/1911, DSA.
  21. Grant by the District Board, Delhi to the pujaris of Kalkajee Temple, Chief Commissioner's Office, B. file 4(5), Educ., 1926, DSA.
  22. The police were first posted at Kalkaji in 1941 when a dispute between three parties of pujaris competing for rights to the temple's income led to fears of a breach of the peace. Naib Tahsildar's report, 8 April 1941. Disputes between the three contesting parties of Pujaris of Kalkaji Mandir on the income of the temple and the Deputy Commissioner's Decision thereto. Deputy Commissioner's Office, 29/1911, DSA.
  23. Interview with Mr Raghu, 5 January 2012.
  24. Interview with Satish Bharadwaj, 24 January 2012.
  25. Interview with Dr Bharadwaj, 19 January 2012 <<http://www.skmpsc.org/#>> [accessed 6 July 2022]. See also Sanjay Srivastava, 'Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and Moral Middle Classes in Delhi', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44 (2009), 338–45.
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  27. Kavita Singh, 'Temple of Eternal Return: The Swāminārāyan Akshardhām Complex In Delhi', *Artibus Asiae*, 70 (2010), 47–76.
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  29. For a fascinating ethnography of the metro system, see: Rashmi Sadana, *The Moving City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021).
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  32. Brosius, *India's Middle Class*, p. 146.
  33. The Akshardhām website is available at: <<https://akshardham.com/explore/Mandir/>> [accessed 6 April 2022]; Akshardhām, Delhi Visitor Guide: <<https://akshardham.com/newdelhi/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/akshardhambrochureenglish.pdf>> [accessed 6 April 2022]. The notice boards at the Akshardhām in Sompura, Gujarat, have similar emphases; see: C. B., 'Akshardham', *Architecture Plus Design*, 14 (1997), 92.
  34. Akshardhām, Delhi Visitor Guide.

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The author declares none.

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