



Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbha Mela

Session 1 Notes

September 10, 2012

Purpose: These notes, by Susan Holman (HGHI staff and HDS alumna) are provided - for internal reference only - as short “draft” summaries of Harvard University South Asian Studies 150: Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Khumba Mela (Harvard College/GSAS 88766), Fall 2012-2013, taught by Diana Eck (Religion) and Rahul Mehrotra (Design). The purpose of these notes is to aid HGHI’s support of this course-based collaboration and anticipated development of public goods related to urbanization and global health.

Meets: Mondays 3-5 in CSIS South S040

Course website: <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k87818&login=yes>

Summary of Today’s Session:

The first half of this first session was led by Professor Mehrotra. The Kumbh Mela (=KM) festival seemed to offer a rare opportunity to explore the relationships between urbanization and sacred space. From his position in architecture at the Design School, he suggests it is a chance to explore religion in the city and how to create a discussion around these topics and the incredibly important ways they influence politics. KM is an example of *temporal* urbanism. “It is more about grand adjustment, not grand vision.” There has been very little focused scholarship on this amazing megacity that is built to exist for only 55 days every 12 years. It is most frequently presented as a *spectacle* – with lots of media photography – but little focused scholarship on the many questions it raises across diverse areas of interest. It is a fantastic interdisciplinary project.

The plan is to have this preparatory workshop, then a small group will be visiting the KM in January, and in the spring semester Professor Mehrotra will run a follow-up seminar for “capture and analysis.”

He showed slides to demonstrate “mapping” of the ephemeral megacity. Participant numbers vary wildly but on average 30 million pilgrims visit every 12 years. There are processions of various organizations across the pontoon bridges built for the event. It lasts 55 days. And it centers on one sacred bath. Much media focuses on the competition of the holy persons (Akharas) to enter the river at the auspicious moment: naked sacred men plunging into the water to touch the moment, the water, the sacred ground. The KM takes place in different locations (image: map of India’s sacred geography). Professor Eck’s new book (*India: A Sacred Geography*) also helps to contextualize. A grad student (Oscar, in the class) found an image of the Haridwar KM from 1850, that offers a curious contrast. The current organization of the KM is heavily based in an administrative structure established by the British Raj, and the system is still followed in planning the KM today: eg. establishing a city grid, the appointment of a commissioner for the city during the 55 days (he is in charge 3 months ahead).

KM is an ephemeral city, a “low rise high density” city of tents, with an exerted power. The two rivers (actually three as for 2013 KM there is also an underground river) meet at a point. The Ganga (=Ganges) comes in from the north. As the riverbank recedes, you can see the memory of the grid from previous Mela in the pattern of the emerging mud and grasses. Archival google earth maps provide us with digital information, though the pattern of the emerging river-to-land layout is never the same twice due to the other changing factors in the interim.



(Those who plan to remain in the class might add the Kumbh Mela to your “google alerts”)

The KM offers us many aspects for study. Religion is the obvious one. We also can look at the engineering of the city. We can ask: what can we learn from the KM? During the second semester Workshop, RM plans to look at, e.g., refugee camps, emergency shelters, pieces of the KM settlements that are still around. Pilgrims often do not want to go back home, who come from such shifting locations. During the KM, every tent has sanitation, water, electricity, for the duration of the festival. The KM city also includes “institutions” embedded within it, such as an area of tents dedicated to “lost and found people” – 20 tents last time – dance and arts performance areas, etc.

What other festivals around the world might offer points for comparison? E.g., RM found reference to and image of the “Burning Man Festival” in Nevada, a 1-week festival with 50,000 people that sets up a perfect semicircle of living spaces. Another example of a temporal landscape. Can such landscapes teach us how to deal with elastic situations where brick and mortar are not a solution?

The Workshop will bring together conversations related to multiple disciplines: urbanism, business, religion, technology, health, governance, engineering, for example. We will ask and refine questions throughout the semester so that those who go on site are ready to run with lots of questions to contribute to further discussion across the 5 co-sponsoring schools (Design, Religious Studies, Business, Public Health, Engineering).

This is the first KM where everyone will probably have a cell phone. How will they be charged? Religion is the upfront issue, the *raison d’être* of the event. Those interested in urbanism are looking at patterns; those focused on business might explore vendors, food; others will want to explore technology, health. Governance is a big question: how is it managed? organized? Who gets access to the water first? The feedback from those who are on site will help the collaboration decide on what kind of results we are likely to develop (RM jokes: *not* a “Harvard Handbook for the Kumbh” and DE agrees the goal is *not* a massive academic tome on this project!)

We are interested in documenting the construction of the festival. It starts January 14; the KM proper starts Jan. 27. A colleague of RM’s in India has arranged to take a series of panoramas of the landscape by camera from a kite – of the same (multiple) sites at different points in the festival/river.

A student asks, “Who is in charge?” A: The government funds it, a huge amount. Last time the BBC got rights to document it; the Uttar Pradesh (=state) government appoints a commissioner for the Mela (*Mela* = “*bathing festival*”), someone who has experience with administration of urban dwellings. Originally the whole process was “ad-libbed” with the Akhartas really the ones who organize it.

DE notes that the site is actually populated at low water level every year, not just every 12 years, for many other (“lesser”) melas. See MacLean on the reading list for history. There is another major mela where the Ganges enters every January in Bengal. Those who will be at the event from the class will be there at a time *between* the two main bathing days. The KM was clearly visible from space satellites in 2001.

A student asks: what are the costs for those who attend? There are people who come and do not choose to sleep in tents. Some sleep on the ground; others get accommodations more comfortably in the neighboring region. The food is free; there is mass feeding. The akhartas take responsibility for feeding everyone. We need to learn more about the economics of the event. A student notes that during the last KM the Tamil press was very interested in emphasizing the morality of the ascetic practices, and there was much debate in the press over how much self-inflicted poverty is required to gain the merits and benefits one hopes from the bathing.



Some debate whether you lose merit if you don't come on foot but use other forms of transit. It is a *pilgrimage* event where ordinary people take on the life of the renunciators.

A student asks: what constitutes the ritual? A: Water is the key critical ritual element. The conjunction of sacred time and a very sacred place. Three rivers ("a mystical river underground"). The most important rite is *bathing*. At other times when people meet at this juncture they perform other rituals such as bringing the ashes of their loved ones, performing death rites, etc. This may go on but is not the main focus of the KM.

There is a whole class of priests who have jurisdiction over pilgrims and pilgrim rites. For example, you might go to them and say you are so-and-so from this group in this village, and he will look your records up in massive documents and tell you which of the priests at the KM is your priest, based on location.

Bathing is a simple rite. It's also about living a simple life. We might ask: why is the focus so much on the ascetics? Seeing the procession is the main thing on major bathing days. (the power of sight in ritual) There is a clear sense that the sadhus devote themselves (if they are good sadhus) to a holy life that lends luster and blessing to the place – holy men and women too live there. By going there you can gain blessing from their presence, a *darshan* element of seeing/beholding.

A student asks: what are the expectations for this workshop?

A: This is yet unclear, and tbd. It is part of why we decided to call it a "workshop" and nothing as clear and settled as a "seminar." It is a fascinating interdisciplinary project, and part is to get the sense of what might have attracted you here today. Lots could be looked at. For example, teachers from across the spectrum of Hindu tradition come and set up tents. There is entertainment, etc.

DE and RM ask: Who are the students in our session today and what are your interests?

[rough notes only for this part; many names below are partial and phonetic guesses at best:]

- Isaac – art and architecture
- Rachel – global health & design, ethnography
- Dorothy Austin – also a counselor
- Paulo – visiting scholar, DRCLAS – Italian, has spent much time living in Colombia – interest in festivals, carnivals
- Alex Watson – teaching Sanscrit, been to 3 KMs, interest in sadhus, what they do and say, and also motivations of pilgrims, personal bios of pilgrims
- James Reisch – PhD, Religion
- Devan – HDS2 – religion, ethics, & politics – how religion & politics combine and conflict (DE notes: high profile political leaders can create a huge mess at the KM if they appear on major bathing days; they are trying to ask celebrities and VIPs to stay away on the main days)
- Kantish – HDS, contemporary representations – photography, media
- Elizabeth – secondary GH – interest in convergence of religion and politics
- Felix – senior – social studies – interest in large festivals, placement
- Leila – neurobio – GH – infectious disease – interest in water (DE notes: last time there was treatment of the water including chlorination, water control, sequestration of city sewage that usually flows in to the river contained in tanks for the festival; water is a big question!)
- Vinya – senior, statistics, with secondary in South Asian studies
- Murcell – bio – health & health policy and design



- Nicholas Roth – second - grad student in South Asian studies – engagements with physical environment; Islam and built environment (DE notes: lots of Muslims are engaged in building the city)
- Alekhan – GSID – urban planner – what’s sacred?
- Anne Monius – teaches at HDS – Tamil
- Anna – HDS
- Jim – artist – training in theater, creating festival – a large one in Chicago
- Helen Marriage – representative of the fellow of [?] – producer of large scale outdoor events; works on logistics and how to make it all work
- Oscar – Peru
- Ann – Loeb fellow – public health and international development – community & informal economy
- ?Meela – coordinating?
- Katie – senior – comp. religion

Diana:

There’s clearly a lot we can draw on. The main requirement is to work on something that is really interesting to you. The challenge is figuring out what is the researchable in advance. End workshop with specific projects that might be worked on. Grants for the workshop in process. More will be clear in the next couple of weeks. Some funding resources are available for students and faculty for J-term. Students who take the Fall course do *not* need to take the follow-up course in the spring; they are not a required pair. Those interested in similar projects might team up.

Discussion about who will go to the KM, who wants to go, etc: The logistics of even making arrangements to try to go are fairly complex. Diana & Rahul will meet Jan 18 in Varanasi.

“It’s preposterous to think a small group, even from Harvard, will unlock the secrets of the Kumbh.” But a small group can study it and ask a lot of questions. Rahul’s workshop in the spring will be broader, to keep continuity – if we want to capture the work as a publication or in some other form.

Helen asks: Do others go as voyeurs rather than as pilgrims?

A: something significant about voyeurism, promulgation of voyeurism. This will be a bigger issue, especially as the Indian government is promoting it as a tourism event!

Books out there on some of the key points include:

- *Mahakumbh* – written by a former KM commissioner
- *Kumbha: India’s Ageless Festival* - emphasizes the role of the sadhus
- *Kumbh Mela and the Sadhus*
- *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954* – by Kama MacLean – the most comprehensive. There is a former British fort at the juncture of the rivers, that was there at the time of the Raj; as you can imagine, the Raj made every attempt to control the festival, given its relationship to the pilgrimage
- See also the references on the course website
- three chapters from *Portrait of India*

Final comments: Rahul: It will be nice to see presentations by those who work in these different areas. We also anticipate the presence of people from other schools, and possibly presentations. (Jennifer Leaning and Sue Goldie/HGHI were mentioned at this point) – details tbd. HBS will be looking at the cellular network; the Design school at cellphone data. More on mapping. For some it may be the beginning of something that looks



sequentially at other sites as well. No one yet has mentioned, for example, astrology. Also, the way India has a remarkable legacy of structural engineers who put up buildings for a temporary period (eg a weekend).

Next week: more of an overview. Goal: to find out where it intersects with things you are passionate about.

Location next week: regular seminar room (see p. 1 & course summary)