



Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbha Mela

Session 12 Notes

December 10, 2012

Today was the final session for the fall semester. During the spring semester, the project will continue via:

1. GSD seminar on temporal urbanism (Rahul Mehrotra) that will also discuss, e.g., the Burning Man festival and the temporal urbanism of refugee camps;
2. An exploratory short-term seminar (a few days long), out of SAI, which Meena Hewett is currently working on for development.
3. Publication of project-related educational public goods, tbd (see brief notes below)

Student project presentation: Ritual Practice and Social Belonging at the Kumbh – Paolo Vignolo

Paolo is Associate Professor of History at the Center of Social Studies of the National University of Bogotá, and Visiting Scholar at the David Rockefeller Center of Latin American Studies. During the Kumbh he is planning a project with 2 other scholars ([Sumangala Damodaran](#), an economist and specialist in development studies based in Delhi, and Diana Duque, a scholar who has worked on the impact of water in Latin America) to explore issues of social differences and social belonging related to ritual and everyday life. Their project is shaped by questions such as Turner's "pilgrimage paradigm" (see e.g., Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*), and how pilgrimage strengthens *communitas*. They hope to explore how pilgrims represent territory. Anticipated methodological approaches include: (1) ethnographic observation; (2) oral history interviews, in-depth, with a few selected individuals, and (3) social cartography. The team will be staying at the Kumbh through the 28th/29th of January to observe a major bathing day. They will spend time at the waterfront on ordinary days, observing what people are doing (with careful awareness to the need for respect to the intimacy of this moment for pilgrims). It is interesting that class, caste, and social hierarchies seem not to be a concern for those who share the bathing experience (as eg in whole villages that come to the festival together). Project details will depend on the researchers, ability to find translators, and circumstances.

Class questions

Diana asked what questions students still have. Some that came up in discussion include:

- Are we aware of our methodological approaches?
- What do people take away from the experience? (i.e., intangibles)
- If the point of the pilgrimage bathing is to end the cycle of reincarnation, why do pilgrims go more than once? Do they go more than once?
- What do people take home? (i.e., tangibles): water from the Sangam? Are there provisions for collecting this water?
- Who uses the markets? Is there a class difference in market use?
- How much does it *feel* like a religious experience? Does it feel spiritual? Or will it feel political? What would be the symbols of "feeling" religious?
- What inspires the faith in this bathing?
- Thinking of the conjunctions of space and place, how do women behave/perform the role of a pilgrim at the Kumbh? Are there any differences from a man's performance?



- Are there women who travel alone to the Kumbh? Women traveling with groups of women? Going on pilgrimage can be a way to get out of the house for an Indian woman
- Is there a demarcated area for prayer at the site for those of other religions? Christians? Muslims? Will we observe Islamic prayers at the Kumbh?
- What kind of advertising is visible? What is its content? What messages are being targeted and where?
- What do we learn that we would not have thought of before?
- Thinking about “center” and “periphery,” is there a clear demarcation of the site or does it just “peter off” at the edges?
- Is there an area for all the kolpavasis (lay people) who stay the whole month?
- The akharas feed all comers, especially patrons, they say; how does this work? What about tourists?
- What is the best word for referring to the holy teachers at the Kumbh since some are not technically called sadhus (Shaivas are called sanyasis)
- As you observe, keep an eye on who is using cell phones

Miscellanies

- Rahul: Cops in India regard the use of maps as a suspicious behavior. Recommend we use our maps in a manner that is as inconspicuous and discreet as possible.
- The GSD team is developing a map we may be able to use on site, mindful of above.
- Diana recommends: Sandra Hausner, *Wandering with Sadhus*
- Diana will send out recommended reading list and some pdfs
- Diana notes the apparent need for a glossary of basic terms for the cross-disciplinary participants
- Potential publications from the project:
 - Meena, Jenny, and Susan offered some of the ideas that have come up, for ongoing discussion. They include:
 1. **Book(s)** – Rahul and Diana emphasize importance of any publication reflecting the cross-disciplinary cross-university connections that are the unique features of the Harvard project;
 2. **Online publication(s)** – can dovetail with #1
 3. **Publication of student papers** – together in some sharply edited format (e.g., *ReVista*, architectural “cartoon” concept, other)
 4. **Curricular development** – from each faculty and school, where onus is on faculty for content, with Project in dialogue about how we can best support
 5. **Student blog** during the trip (Jenny will create now; class suggested WordPress blog; all students should contribute, even those who do not go to the festival)
 - [6. The **public health group** also has plans to generate publication-targeted material, not discussed today]

These are ideas for discussion; what do people think? What do they need? Rahul advised that we plan to use the “Exploratory Seminar” that we hope will take place in March (Meena is working on organizing this) to discuss publication specifics. Rahul and Diana reiterated that publications must demonstrate uniqueness of the Harvard project, set the ground, illustrate and draw from these multiple new connections and their broad implications; need for collated data, ideas of e.g., studio report, and importance for each individual idea to be curated as best fits its target media and content.