Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbha Mela

Session 2 Notes

September 17, 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:

Diana Eck began today's class with a review of who is participating, and introductions from those present for the first time. The workshop currently includes approximately 16 students and about 10 "guest" participants from across the university.

During the first half of today's class, Diana Eck provided an introduction to the Kumbh Mela (KM) in the context of its geographical, historical, and religious dimensions. The KM offers many points for engagement with student interests, and she encouraged students again to focus and identify what most interests them. It is essentially an event in motion: the movements of the sadhus/sanyasis at the meeting of two (three) rivers.

A Google Earth image illustrates why the Ganga has long been seen as the "white" river. Laden with mica as it flows from the Himalayas, it graces its bathers with an almost glittering appearance at times, as they rise from the water, traces of mica clinging to their bodies. The Yamuna River is known as the "blue" river. According to the Rig Veda, those who bathe where the white and dark join, go up to heaven. The point is also described poetically as white and blue lotuses intertwined, as well as white and dark pearls. According to the Puranas (a corpus of Sanskrit literature), a third river also joins the two at this point, a mythical or mystical river named for the goddess of water and of learning: Saraswati (or Sarasvati). There are many hymns to the Saraswati, who is said to have disappeared, creating a mystery concerning her whereabouts. The power and significance of the Saraswati has amplified over the centuries, with this confluence of river and goddess persisting throughout.

The city – originally named Prayaga ("place of sacrifice") was renamed Allahabad by the Mogul emperor Akhbar in 1582, when he built the fort that now stands at the point on the sandy bank of the site where the rivers meet. For more about this fort, see Kama Maclean's *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954.* Charles Ball's 1857 *History of Indian Mutiny* suggests the fort was eventually remodeled. Yet the city itself and the site goes back over 1000 years before Islam. "Tirtha" ("crossing place") is a concept that has also gathered spiritual meaning. The site is known as the "King of Tirthas" ("Tirtharaja"). The city's name also indicates its importance as sacrificial ground. Here we see sacred precinct in concepts of circles – large areas of sacrificial ground that radiate smaller and smaller.

Diana showed one example of a pilgrimage map. Such maps help make the primary elements of the site clear. The map showed the goddess in the waters, a sacred tree within the fort precincts, a Hanuma shrine outside the fort, and a panoply of deities above the map. The Khumbh Mela is not just a great place for humans, but an in-gathering place where all the gods come, indeed a place to which other Tirthas come because they, too, accumulate human sin over time from absorbing it from all of their followers, and they need cleansing. The name Prayaga is not exclusive to this site; there are other Prayagas, e.g. in the mountains. One dramatic example is that of Rudraprayag (Diana showed two pictures), where those who wish to engage in the sacrificial ground must hang onto a chain in order to get into the river and bathe t such a place. Similarly, the term "Triveni" means "three rivers" and there are other trivenis in India. The greatest triveni is at the southernmost tip of India, (Kanyakumari), where the Bay of Bengal meets the Indian Ocean and the Arabian sea.

The religious action at these places consists of pilgrims offering a vow of religious intention to bathe, and proceeding with the help of Brahmin priests into the water. At Prayag there is a soft sandy bank, and a significant distance from the end of the city to the joining point of the rivers. People come to do the ritual, which usually also includes immersion of ashes of deceased loved ones. In this ritual, they actually create a figurative body out of clay that represents the deceased, merge it with the ashes, and place it --- and go into bathe with it---- in the river. There are also places like this that are called "three cities". The primary fame of such sites is as a bathing place, in that "one who drinks there enjoys liberation."

The KM occurs in the winter-when the bank is the scene of encampment, every January. When people gather for the "Mag Mela" ("great Mela," every 12 years), the encampment continues for a whole month. It attracts crowds from across North India who vow to stay the whole month. The routine is:

- eat once a day
- bathe three times a day
- live in a tent

Teachers also attend. Some go every year. Literature speaks of the king going into the encampment and giving away all he has. One such teacher (term sounds like "dubay"?) whose roots are in the 5th century continues to come, will have his own tent and encampment, and is a source of information to visiting scholars.

Three days are most auspicious for bathing:

1. January 14
2. "no-moon day"
3. "full moon day"

Those who have written about this, the world's largest pilgrimage, speak of how the festival becomes a microcosm of Hindu civilization, a sort of massive conference. Teachers debate and remain throughout the festival. These teachers are separate from the sadhus and akharas; they come and teach from every strand of the tradition. One needs focus to study because there are so many of them. Their followers come, they have teachings, plays, etc. The site is an ingathering of class from all over India. The last (2001) KM became a point for rebuilding focus among the Nationalist World Hindu association.

It would be interesting to know who (and what groups) are going—if there is a way to find out in advance. The images of masses illustrates that it would be "daunting for those of you who are not certain about crowds"!

KM is *not* Mecca. It is much bigger, for one thing. And it is not as organized, for another. We don't have, for example, the separate airport that was built just for those going to Mecca. On the big bathing days an estimated 15 million participate, 30 million (estimate) in 2001, i.e. on those days literally the largest city on earth. How do

you find anyone in the crowd? Is there GPS? Are there maps? The Government of UP and of India collaborate on putting it together because of the safety aspects. Some statistics mentioned for KM include:

- 5000 gallons of pure drinking water per minute
- 6000 electrical poles
- 13,500 latrines
- 22 fire stations
- 20,000 police
- 300 lifeguards (is this enough?)
- 100 doctors/nurses (is *this* enough?!)

The astonishing engineering feats include the challenge of the train station, vast commerce, crowd control. Participants must give up the idea of any individual autonomy beyond the crowd in which you are moving. The voluntary supply of people with food is all part of the mammoth undertaking.

The Ganga is the divinity present there.

Diana spoke of the context for her interest in the KM. She came to it through her study of the Ganga in Banaras, the Hindu holy city. "City of light" – a place of primordial light, shot up from the heavens, a linga of light, a piece of the depths of the sky, extending the whole geographical area into the surrounding countryside. What exactly does it mean that this is a city of light? People come here to live out their last days, with many hospices in the city. This is the primary place in which one receives *moksha*. The "linga of light" evokes a piercing of the earth by divinity.

There are many famous pilgrimage circles in India, and multiple notions of pilgrimage. Diana's interest in the KM came out of this exploration between her two books, with a focus on the need to understand that the city exists in reference to others, and that duplication has significance here. We look at each pilgrimage as part of a place of reference. Some pilgrimage places (she showed slides) are high in the Himalayas and linked to the Himalayan tribes. Here we find a living landscape where cities and villages are linked to one another.

"The land bears traces of stories." For example, low-lying mountains are seen as areas where one avatar rescued from the sea with his arrow. In the stories we hear, "this is the place" – over and over, in the sense that the land is linked to the story. Lands are also linked to one another in pilgrimage networks across the compass. There are sets that are linked to one another, for example by the great Melas. The linking of place to place is part of the larger network.

<u>Brief discussion:</u>
A student asks: Are the KM crowds seen as indistinguishable – ie, defined by sameness, no divisions, same clothes, etc?

A: KM lacks the structure and seamlessness of such an image, unlike eg. the Hajj. There is none of the putting on of white garments, for example, nor is there any sense of leaving behind one's ethnic identity. Rather, in the Hindu tradition, there is a coming together of a huge and rather colorful diversity of ordinary people, including pilgrims from hither and yon, saints and sages, boatmen, etc. The KM shares the complexity of the Hajj but not as ordered.

A student asks: How are different geographic identities felt?

A: This is hard to answer. There is lots of advertising. Praise that makes people feel they have come to the right place. There is a "Durkheimian collective effervescence" – places where intensity of the collective is particularly palpable.

During the second hour, the class watched the 41-minute documentary, "Allahabad's Mela: The People and their Great Fair" (produced by Joseph W. Elder of the University of Wisconsin, 2009, more information here), followed by about 10 minutes of discussion.

[random jottings during the film:

- 1000 tons of plastic waste was left after the 2001 KM
- 16,000 sewer drains empty into the river area normally
- much scepticism by those attending, working at the KM; strong expression of corruption and labor abuses
- the "lost and found" people tent re-united 118,000 lost people during the 2001 KM]

Class discussion following the film raised several issues for further discussion:

- The KM as a ground for social protest (e.g., 2001 KM was the first such KM after the Dec. 6, 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque by Hindu fanatics)
- KM always has some political valence
- Film expressed "near-universal unhappiness" over labor and wage issues at the KM (eg voices of sweepers who were brought in but given no place to stay) (Diana mentioned an anthropology grad student who is working on labor issues in Delhi)
- Huge efforts involved in taking it all down after the event – receive little attention
- Obvious social stratification (e.g. voice insisting that the KM is really intended for the wealthy and for foreigners
- Tensions between the religious and the "practicalists" (e.g. one man said "I have no religion; I'm a humanist.")
- Women sleeping out in the cold, no shelter
- Notion of mixed cultures and disruption of cultures