



Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbha Mela

Session 10 Notes

November 26, 2012

Today's shortened (1-hour) session included three student presentations:

Anna Kneifel: The green Kumbh movement of Swami Chidanand Saraswati (SCS)

With the Ganga treated as paradoxically both a sacred river and a septic tank, there is a movement to raise public awareness of environmental concerns. Ganga Action Parivar (www.gangaaction.com) is one group leading an initiative to make 2013 the first environmentally friendly Kumbh. Anna summarized the group's efforts to enact change during the festival by a public awareness campaign that will promote:

1. Collective action: e.g., planting trees, eco-friendly toilets, and distribution of blessed saplings;
2. Individual action: e.g., refusing plastic bags, always using trash bins, not throwing anything (including flowers) in the river; and
3. Public awareness: through billboards, videos, street plays, concerts, and a volunteer program

During the Kumbh, Anna hopes to focus on visiting the performances as well as learning more from direct engagement with those involved in the education and outreach campaign. Her questions include:

- How do the street events bring the topic to the public?
- Are spectators and pilgrims given practical tips or abstract concepts?
- Are religious symbols (such as reference to the Ganga as "She") used to convey these messages and if so, how?
- What is the potential for long-term influence and relevance to other pilgrimages?
- How might these initiatives be cultured to support pertinent change in India's ecological policies?

Discussion:

Diana: How do they plan to communicate the detailed messages and suggestions that are listed on their website to participants at the festival, especially as printed fliers would produce potential trash!

A: posters, videos, billboards, "mouth-to-ear" messaging

Kalpesh: How is the government helping to support these issues?

Devin: Will the performances be integrated with other performances at the mela or be distinct and separate?

Helen: the suggestions don't seem to include environmental concerns such as energy use, for example from vehicle travel, electricity/power, smoke from all the fires, etc.

Diana: Focus on the SCS is good given our time limits, but it's also good for us to develop a sensitivity to the broader frame, and other green movements; there are many others.

Rahul: Take a look at other places where they've had ecological policies in general, such as trash in Chennai.

Rachel Taylor: Flowers at the Kumbh

Rachel provided the group with a short background summary of how flowers and flowered garlands have become important as religious offerings in Hinduism. Their use is disputed; Buddhist monks, for example, are not allowed to sniff flowers. Gandhi avoided garlands since they require the violence of cutting and thus killing



the flower. The ideal is to offer flowers that are not cut but simply fall, and gather them while they fall. Unfortunately, this is a bit impractical. Marigold garlands are the dominant image of flowers as religious offerings at the Kumbh. Flower offerings also take the form of small boats used as lamps, with oil, placed in the river. Rachel's research includes reports on cut flower production in Asia. She was able to get some data on the estimated produce for all of India in 1998 (with an estimate of 300,000 metric tons per year), and loose marigold production in Uttar Pradesh (approximately 2 metric tons per hectare), although there are many questions about the actual numbers in these reports. She is researching sources of flowers for the Kumbh. Delhi has in the past sold flowers from three major markets, but they were recently relocated to a single unit in Ghazipur, on the Uttar Pradesh border. Diana says there are very large flower markets in Varanasi.

Discussion:

Rachel's and other questions during discussion include:

- How are flowers worn at the Kumbh?
- Does quantity matter?
- Are garlands clothing? (especially for the naga bhabhas)
- How are they discarded and what is the implication for pollution?
- Diana: Who presents the flower garlands to the bhabhas? And what is their role in aesthetics?
- Overlaps between flowers and food?

Isaac Dayno: "Damming the Sacred"

The construction of dams on the sacred rivers in India raise many questions and issues at the confluence of environment, social concerns, and religious implications. Nehru, for example, said in 1947 that "dams are the temple of modern India." Dam construction has mushroomed, from about 200 in Nehru's time to over 4000 today, with more than half of these built between 1971 and 1989. For an overview of the controversies over dams on the Narmada river, see "Drowned Out," a documentary about a dam that flooded villages where the residents chose to "stay and die" rather than abandon their homes.¹ The Sardar Sarovar Dam was so controversial that the World Bank, one of its largest funders, withdrew support after an independent panel in 1994. The Tehri Dam is the highest dam in Asia, is built in an area at risk of seismic shifts, raising additional complex questions about its destructive potential. Dams significantly lower the water flow and levels, and disproportionately disturb the lives of indigenous populations. Displacement affects rural more than urban residents, with water traditionally used for farming instead going to the production of power and electricity for cities. While the focus of much media is on negative effects, the benefits of dams include raising the standard of living for urban dwellers, flood control, sewage control, economics, and potentially food production. Yet dams are incredibly costly. India's dams are funded by foreign sources as well as private companies. The hidden costs include unknown factors such as their effect on climate change. Overall, dams are a multidisciplinary issue, with implications for humanitarian, environmental, cultural, spiritual, and public health issues. Dams are thus a highly contentious issue in India; see, for example, the 1999 "manifesto" article by activist Arundhati Roy, "[The Greater Common Good](#)."

How does this relate to the Kumbh? Isaac and the group discussion today noted especially:

¹ trailer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbns3I4-0ZA>; the film was made by Franny Armstrong and features Arundhati Roy, an activist; clips from interview with director at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJE1rgWwjAw>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuXh_10txz4&feature=relmfu



- What does this mean for quality and sources of potable water at the Kumbh? The tube wells and electricity and sewage?
- Where does the electricity come from? Does the power come from the damming that stops the flow of the Ganga?
- What do the sadhus think about such issues?
- Diana: There is enough here for several papers! As we focus on the Kumbh, we might ask how these issues have a place in the environmental awareness at the festival. Rahul: Does the Kumbh become a forum for environmentalists? Looking at the instrumental effect of the dam makes the issue more regional.
- Diana: What does this mean for the traditional pilgrimage circumambulation of the Narmada, the only river in the world that people actually walk around as part of a religious practice? Certainly the dams could affect the temple sites but this is only a small aspect of its effect on religious practices.

Next week:

Ned Whitman on biophages

Brenna on entertainment

GSD folks will talk about georeferencing: Please bring your cameras/digital devices for practical advice to help us coordinate settings to best share data on site.

These notes 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). **Course website:** <http://sites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k87818&login=yes>