



Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbh Mela

Session 6 Notes

October 22, 2012

(notes for today thanks to Jenny Bordo)

Today's class began with the film, "KUMBH MELA," focusing on images of sadhus. We watched the beginning of the procession of the "Shahi snan" (= "Royal Bath"; Maclean defines as: "akharas are allowed, by convention, to form grand processions to the sangam on only three bathing days during the [festivals])

Questions from the class that came up while watching the procession:

Q: Noting the image of a government official bowing to a holy man – how do government officials navigate the social dynamics?

Q: When did this sadhus smoking ganja become a part of the tradition?

Q: How were the bathing orders decided in the past?

A: Historically, order of bathing decided by akharas with weapons – back to 16th century and perhaps beyond – the use of weapons to decide who had patronage, trading rights, and priority in bathing at melas. Has been a part of the history of the Kumbh Mela until it was taken over first by the British, then the Indian government. If you look at the Mela at Haridwar – largely organized by most powerful akharas. (Maclean defines akharas as "lit. gymnasium but in this context refers to a group of sadhus, which might translate as a 'sect'")

Q: Where does the martial imagery (sadhus waving swords) come from?

A: For more info on armed yogis and sanyasins - read William R. Pinch's book, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge Univ Press, 2006). Imagine that 16th century armies might have looked like this. The first time we saw the images, noticed the weapons but didn't think too much about them – don't seem threatening – seem like they are being presented, a status symbol or prop, not in a threatening way. But another student: finds it quite threatening. The Haridwar mela in the 18th century was basically a battleground, according to historical records, where it sounds like a major slaughter.

The idea of hierarchy in the akharas is important. There are regiments of yogis/sadhus – all armed, all had interest in pilgrimage. The ingathering of ascetics as a pilgrimage is very important.

The rights of land allocation of land for the festival is now under the control of the government. This allocation has been done already for this Kumbh.

Q: What is the role of akharas at the Kumbh Mela and elsewhere?

Q: 100,000 sanyasis (=“ascetics”)– or more – what are all of those people doing?

Discussion: Demonstrations of linga power – both on the display side of the Kumbh/also on the power side.

There are women who are part of these orders, both as teachers and naga ascetics. There are naga women, but they are harder to recognize because they are clothed. Women can’t be elected to the akhara governing body, and they are the last to bathe.

Ascetics attract ordinary Hindus, to whom they give darshan (=reverence), guidance, blessings. In the Shahi snans (processions), you can identify the kings of the mela; with all the emblems of kingly power. Today they ride on tractors instead of elephants. Elephants have been banned in the main area, since the 1954 mela where there was a stampede.

Some bridges are only for vehicles, some for pedestrians, some for animals. In the film you could see this. Bridges are one-way.

Discussion about the flowers. Notice the marigolds in all the images. There are immense flower markets, mala makers across North India must be at the Kumbh. For the naga babas, one form of apparel is a few garlands of marigolds.

A student asks: Who are the flower makers?

A: Many flower makers are very low caste, or have converted to Islam. Marigolds have only been in India for 300 years. They are native to Mexico (and chilis came with the Portuguese). There is no sanskrit word for marigold. However, in the ritual use of flowers today, marigolds are THE ritual flower. What was there before? Brahmins in the South will only use jasmine, since marigolds are foreign.

Q: Where are the encampments in relation to the river banks?

A: On both sides.

Mapping flowers and milk. Interesting to think that if you mapped just those two products, you would have an amazing read of the geography of the kumbh, movement of goods, aside from the formal networks of ritual.

There are places where the pouring of milk is part of the bathing ritual, although this has been discouraged here.

Has the use of marigolds as an offering to the river been discouraged as well? Think of the environmental impact.

Q: Are we still living in a world where we see the heart of India anchored still to faith in sadhus?

Q: How much are the sadhus themselves the magnet for this event?



A: Maclean talks about darshan in her article on seeing: how the sadhus are a huge draw for many people. It almost seems like they are giving a performance, with their role in the procession as part of that performance.

Discussion: Seeing versus not-seeing the sadhus at the Kumbh: How we allow foreigners to see certain things at the Kumbh says a lot about the purpose of the Kumbh. Darshan is seeing and receiving the blessing of being seen – with so many darshan worthy folks there.

We see lots of ritual bathing of ordinary people, including lots of ritual bathing of women. How much did the media impact of the last Kumbh make some parts of this performance more important than others? Anna King's article on the media and the mela speaks of this. Indeed, there was the tremendous focus on advertising in the media.

The question people raise – is there something about the largely silent witness of this multitude of renouncers to a society against which it is making a statement about having cast off that which doesn't matter? This is certainly part of the whole cycle of life. The Naga babas are indicative of the hyper-visual culture in India, the focus on performance ritual/visualization that naga babas are just one aspect of.

The naga babas are at the Kumbh for a few months in the middle of winter: This is no small thing! Their quarters are closed during the daytime. They are not always under the observational eye of everybody else. Pinch has a lot of historical descriptions of these guys from the 16th, 17th, 18th century – from Portuguese travelers, etc. The Naga babas have basically defied death: to become renouncers, lie on own cremation pyre, rise then as officially dead to the world. Image of the sadhu is something that for many people is an undergirding image of spiritual seriousness.

Discussion about how the Kumbh compares to the Burning Man festival: Comparison raises the question of motivation to do this: How do you determine a real ascetic? At Kumbh Mela, these are the “real guys.” Put 180,000 of them together and you have a demonstration of spiritual power. Burning Man and Kumbh Mela may look the same, but the difference is in the motivation.

How do you tell a true ascetic? Throughout South Asia this is the common question. There is both an extraordinary and ordinary norm in Hindu life. The extraordinary norm is for those who have cut themselves off from the ordinary life of settled society. This happens throughout Indian civilization.

Individuality as it applies to the sadhus: what does this mean? The Akharas are so obsessed with hierarchy, structure, organization. They are invested in battling it out within the organization. Where does individuality fall? Or is it that you renounce society to sign up as another organization? We think of the sadhus as a solitary wanderer, but actually akharas are highly organized – staves, tridents, military disciplines, presence of power of these disciplines. Mattison Mines discusses this issue in his book, *Public faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994). Mines is professor of anthropology, and the book looks at leaders of monastic orders. There is room for individual expression and identity.

Diana lists out terminology for sadhus (7-8 words). They have renounced life.

The sanyasis gather in akharas or mutts (?), and have meetings. What is the impact of when so many of them come together? When you have a type of “National convention” of renouncers? Read: *The Ascetics of Kashi* (Surajit Sinha, *Ascetics of Kashi: An Anthropological Exploration* (Varanasi: N.K. Bose Memorial Fdn, 1978), for more about the ways the ascetics are organized.

Q: Under what circumstances do people have tonsure at the Kumbh?

Discussion: The religious idea of giving your hair to the river became a scandal under the British, when someone was collecting the hair and selling it to British wigmakers (see Maclean). There needs to be some holy depositories for the marigolds, the offerings, the milk, the hair...

“Akharas” (across north India) also means a wrestling ground, another concept for the orders or lineages of akharas. Ritualized wrestling comes under the order of Hanuman.

Comment on the images of sadhus with cell phones, with sunglasses, etc. Some have accused orders of recruiting young men to dress as sadhus/with ash etc. to swell their ranks during the Kumbh Mela, in order to produce more of a showing.

Another insight into the akharas today is through the website of Rampuri Baba, part of the Juna Akhara (<http://rampuri.com/>). The class watched the “Initiation Rites” Video, showing the story of a Dane and a Swede who want to enter into the life of the renouncer (“Entering the Extraordinary World”).

What are the things we need to know? What questions lead from this look at the akharas? Map from Kumbh Adikari of where the sites for akharas are? Trying to digitize a map.

Do people have thoughts about what reasons there might be for someone *not* in religious studies to study the akharas? What are the components, whether religious places of gathering, how does this unit work, how does that aggregate through the 13 akharas and beyond - mapping the land-use mix? Hierarchy of streets, etc.

Another contradiction evident is that between solitary mendicant life, and this spectacle of meeting up in very large social settings: What is the purpose behind this? What does it say about social need?

Several in our group are planning to work on a project for studying toilets at the Kumbh Mela: Do the logistics of the akharas matter for studying the toilets? One big point in sanitation will be: Where are toilets with respect to preparing food?

What are 180,000 sadhus when you compare that with 30 million visitors? How much has this ritual changed from being about the sadhus to being more mainstream? The processions of the sadhus will occur on main bathing days.

Question: What do sadhus teach? What are the political sites, place for teaching about the issues of the day? There will be places where some of them are devoted to teaching about relationship between religious practice/daily practice to care for the earth/waters. (Ex. 'green kumbh' – how are they messaging this?) There are teachings going on constantly. What are the emphases?

The numbers are grossly over reported. (This is done intentionally since anticipated numbers are linked to funding applications; the Government wants funds)

Upcoming classes:

Next week – Look at the media mela; media that has been produced about the Kumbh Mela – also, the issue of pilgrims and tourists

Nov 5 – Update on urban planning

Last three sessions – sharing the research questions everyone has – spend one session brainstorming the contents, what would be the Harvard handbook on the Kumbh Mela – will this be a series of essays, visual representation?

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