

Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbh Mela

Session 7 Notes

November 5, 2012

(The university canceled classes on Monday 10/29 due to Hurricane Sandy)

Diana recommends Rampuri's new book, *Autobiography of a Sadhu: A Journey into Mystic India*.

Today's session focused on a report from the design team. Namita and Felipe (GSAS/GSD) are just back after 3 days in the field at the Kumbh site with a photographer, as part of their work on the Kumbh. We expect images from the trip soon. Today, Rahul introduced Vineet, Oscar, and Rui(?) (GSD) who presented on the Kumbh in terms of "Understanding the Ephemeral City," based on (1) preliminary field notes from the on-site team, (2) a series of maps, and (3) questions the GSD team is asking (see separate attachment). The focus is on the *metabolism* of the city, its flow, how it works, local concerns vs. regional concerns. The focus is on geospatial thinking.

The district magistrate's boundary of the mela site has now been defined. The definition is very precise (illustrated), and irregular. A slide layering outlines over Boston and Manhattan help to give an idea of the size. Compared to Boston, it's something like the edge of Somerville down to Quincy. Easier to see over a map of Manhattan, where the outlines run from e.g. ~110th street down to ~20th St, with an arm reaching east several miles. The total formal site area is 100 square meters; 1 square meter=1 hectare or 2.4 acres. (in other words, 10² kilometers: a lot of walking!) The 2001 mela site was 3363 hectares. The actual area is larger than this due to allocations for parking. There will be many more vehicles this year. Also, space is needed for storage.

[Diana wants to see these overlay maps from today's presentation available online to the class]

The map now allows us to conceptualize "metabolism" of the event in terms of delivery system flows (e.g., food, medicines, commodities, etc.). Dots on the map for locations, though we still don't really know, literally, what each dot means (whether it's a van, tent, or something else). We still have many questions about the delivery systems (see questions).

JS Mishra's *Mahakumbh: The Greatest Show on Earth* is (despite its title) a very useful and key source for the data we have about the 2001 festival. We know that in 2001, there were 5 warehouses, 14 organized markets, 107 fixed price grain shops, for example. (A fixed price grain shop is government controlled and rationed)

We are very interested in the food flows. The word from the site is that they want to have mobile vendors to help decrease congestion related to feeding sites and communal meals. The hypothesis

is that food will flow from the warehouses to various kitchens. We are asking: where do the supplies come from? What are the transport modes? Hierarchies?

In terms of water: In 2001, we know there were: 28 tubewells, 3420 private taps, 12,000 public standposts, 141 water tanks (each holding 2000 liters) and 28x18,000 fire trucks.

The GSD team provides a suggested map for each of the delivery systems. Putting it all together in an overlay within the context of the site and the region exposes the immense complexity. As a point of reference, Rahul reminded the class that in Mumbai the water provision is 90 liters per person per day in squatter settlements, but throughout the formal city 220-280 liters per person per day is used – much of it in washing cars!

MAP: Ganga: If all of the water from the Ganga flowed through all of its locations, it all would flow to Dhaka.

ADD:

MAP: overlaying rail networks

MAP: overlaying road networks

The region is evenly rich in terms of agriculture, very flat, with easy access.

We can think of the Kumbh as a major disturbance event in this flow.

When the river is in full flood, much of what will be the most productive land is under water. So ownership of the land is always an issue. There are several different formal government actions that rule what goes on in these zones, but much question about its implementation.

On site, some religious allocations seem to have a lot of dedicated space, and others—we just don't know.

Following the field report construction timeline, we know that construction starts in June, before the waters begin to recede. The pontoons, for example, have been constructed, and painted, and are now being moved into place. The tent construction begins in August/September.

The map shows 14 sectors, with a police station at the entrance and end of each sector. Almost 14% of the area on the map is land that is “previously built up”. The closest rail station—across the river—is Juntsi (sp?). There are 18 bridges. Squat toilets are being built (photos from the field).

Thinking about the Kumbh in terms of geospatial concepts raises many questions (see questions). For example: where do the flowers come from? How can we use geotagged media data? For example, what if we looked at all twitter languages for the equivalent of the phrase “just landed”? (In fact, this seems to be a largely North American practice). How can geospatial data help us with issues of global health and the Kumbh that Sue Goldie touched on in her lecture? We think especially of the many different layers she identified, the multidimensional aspects of global health. Putting these many questions together can help us spatially synthesize the different research projects.

Diana asks: Can we get a list of who's been allocated to different plots? Religious allotments and relationships between them help us understand flows to other parts of India

A: They are working on it.

Diana notes that the Harvard map collection has a 1922 map of Allahabad that is more detailed of the streets of the city than any she's seen recently.

Question: Who are the volunteers/volunteer groups? Who are the social institutions? The other kinds of NGOs interested in getting their message out? The environmental groups? What is the allotment to other groups?

A: There are many groups of Indian Boy Scouts. These are big conventions, with thousands of people present. The kitchens are created by donors, who are wealthy lay devotees.

Diana notes that there are many charities present, with free distributions, for example, of shoes. Charity is important because of the spiritual benefit of donations at such an event. Food distribution is a symbol of the akharas' popularity, but how do we distinguish this from social services that get set up? And how do divisions take place? What to call the other orders who are not part of an akhara? Rampuri is part of the Juna Akhara.

How can we usefully look at flow and activities? How capture geospatial data? For example, look at everything that goes on in one sample square kilometer? vs. the logic of overall organization? It's really like chord and melody – you want to see both. And what is the equivalent of a neighborhood unit within the mela?

Currency is another part of the flow and multidimensional identity: the "Alternative currency" that is, spiritual currency. How do we overlay all these currencies?

DE: The devotees provide some of the spiritual currency, through their volunteer services, such as providing power to run a kitchen. Another currency is that which those devotees who are coming actually give to the sadhus: money for darshan. They will put currency notes under their feet. Even if you are the host of such a large feeding or volunteer event, your role is not only to feed but to offer payment to the sadhu so they will accept your gift; *dakshina* (sp?) in Sanskrit.

Isaac asks: Who are the VIP tents for?

A: Gov't officials, friends and family at their discretion, next to the fort. [n.b. we are on the other side!]

What are the major things someone coming to the KM might want to visit (in addition to the bathing site)?

- the Hanuman statue
- the (highly contested) sacred tree
- other desiderata



CLASS LOGISTICS FOR THE NEXT FEW WEEKS:

notes:

Denny at HDS working on media and tourism, maybe on the 19th, focus on the way its advertised Isaac and the GSD group – rivers – what is this water like that finally arrives? what are the major forces of upstream pollution? Dan Schrag at the Harvard Center for the Environment is very interested in coming in on this – just in the last week.

Anna is working on the “green kumbh” campaign, and its very practical approaches reflected in, e.g., the entertainment/performances at the mela. Also, the little cotton bags being made that vendors will use for their goods instead of plastic bags. And what about the production and distribution of the tents—where are they coming from? Apparently one family is responsible for the tents; what is the design? Is there a standard?

Rachel, Anna, Nick: Green/environment

Kalpesh: where are the religious leaders coming from? Who’s next to whom and how are they placed? What is the hierarchy of the akharas? Is it like an inner city? Brenna is also working in this area. The akharas are locked up at night; can we get access to the encampments? Perhaps Goswami and Rampuri?

The health issues: Richard Cash; sanitation; Leila. Sanitation questions: How do the government get involved with the religious leaders? What can we say about the spread of disease?

Presentations must include input from Fellows in the class: Helen and Paolo!

Overall working plan for the next few weeks:

Plan for short reports:

Nov. 12th - global health/public health, sanitation – e.g. Susan for HGHI (web resource page sharing), Gregg Greenough (reporting on HSPH projects), Leila, others (DE can identify)

Nov. 19th – start with media, presentation/representation of the KM, media & religious institutions

Nov. 26th – Green Kumbh

Dec. 3rd – entertainment

Dec. 10th – Wrap up and work on next step