



Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbha Mela

Session 9 Notes

November 19, 2012

Today's theme for discussion was "The Mela and the Media," with three student presentations: (1) Devin Denny, (2) Felix de Rosen, and (3) Kalpesh Bhatt.

1. Devin Denny: The Kumbh and promotion of international tourism

Devin is researching how international tourism can affect the overall experience of the Mela. She asked: How is the KM represented to attract international tourists? Does international tourism interfere with the religious purpose of the festival? She has contacted travel agents, reviewed tourism websites, and "read a lot of poorly written travel blogs." Travel agents are willing to give her very general information but do not provide specific demographic information or information about typical ages of travelers to the Kumbh. The bloggers tend to be adventurous types, who have done a lot of traveling and backpacking.

No official counts appear on how many visit the KM as international tourists; one estimate is somewhere more than 60,000. Tourists are known to come from (e.g.) Germany, Italy, France, the UK, and Africa. There is an increasing number of Chinese tourists. The Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism is training tour guides in multiple languages, and notes a need for more tour guides who speak Japanese and Korean. Package trips that appeal to international tourists are most commonly "all-inclusive"; when targeted to international travelers, these are often double the price of the identical package targeted to an Indian traveler within India. International visitors are 2-3 times more likely to visit the festival on the major bathing days. Such tour packages tend to focus on a visit to the site on a major bathing day once – that is, the tourist comes overnight and stays only 1-2 days. She's found a number of facebook entries on the festival that advise readers not to bathe, because the water is dirty and cold.

The presentation and description of these packages tend to downplay the religious aspect of the Kumbh, emphasizing it rather as a spectacle. Often religious traditions are not mentioned in tourist websites. Common lodgings are identified as "luxury tents" that include air conditioning and heat. The "Swiss tent" images remind Devin of the fantastic tent images in the Harry Potter movie about the Quidditch World Cup. (see example from our newsfeed: <http://www.vaildaily.com/article/20121117/AE/121119865/1078&ParentProfile=1062>)

Typically Americans say their interest in India started with a movie or with stories from parents / the "hippie generation." It is interesting to see how certain movies or 60s hippie associations present in some of the package descriptions. Safety, security, fire safety and issues regarding overcrowding are key themes in the literature. All legitimate tourist pages about the festival include links to the official government KM site. Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook do not seem to be used in tourism advertisements for the festival. Key phrases include: luxury, holy man, rich tradition, new, exotic, premium, one-of-a-kind, mystery, spectacle. The rhetoric is reminiscent of ads to visit Niagara Falls: something you should see before you die, but not really telling you why.

Does tourism interfere with the religious aspects of the festival? Religious insensitivity is a concern. For example, in 2001 a British tourism agency brought meat, alcohol, and related luxuries to the festival, even though meat and alcohol are explicitly forbidden; the agency was shut down. There have been a handful of other examples, demonstrating lack of respect for the religious nature and boundaries of the event, including interference with the purity concerns. Devin is following the ongoing debate between the BBC and Kumbh officials regarding broadcast and advertising rights for the 2013 mela.

Indian journalists complain that Western journalism focuses on the photo spectacle and does not understand the core principles.

Devin will email the class with a list of the tour sites she reviewed.

Discussion:

A student asks: Did you find anything about tourism targeted to non-resident Hindus? Would be interesting to look in the India diaspora literature, including regional publications. Some examples are: *India Abroad*, *India New England*; There's a large Indian community in Atlanta, for example.

Diana notes: Reminiscent of the WGBH PBS series on pilgrimage, following someone going on a pilgrimage; it included following Indian Americans, she thinks.

Kalpesh notes: ISCON has a tour pack for 5 days that is very reasonable at \$300-400.

A student notes: Would be interesting to look at tensions between the English language media and how tourists are actually represented in the local-language media. These are very different perspectives.

Diana notes: The world gets to know the Kumbh in ways denied to less advantaged sectors of society. The tendency to sensationalist coverage is a real challenge. We will need to be very careful about our coverage of the event.

2. Felix de Rosen

Felix is exploring representation as it relates to how we can learn & communicate about the Kumbh. Questions he asks include: what is representation? Why are we interested in learning: exoticism? Life after death? Does the media create voyeurs? What is the role of the media in creating consumers vs. participants? How does representation differ from experience? The Kumbh's procession is after all called a "staged drama," a "worldly play." Felix shared from his travel experience creating visual media and from related literature on the Kumbh.

You can never be fully "right" when you try to represent something that is not your life. So who should film the mela? What if we gave a sadhu a camera? In fact, this has been done; see <http://www.asceticswithcameras.org/> (a site currently "under construction for the upcoming Maha Kumbh Mela"). Goal is to "empower these ascetics to participate in process of media making." Imaging the lives of others is a learning experience that bridges human loneliness, says Felix. We can always learn about them and ourselves in the process; how can we imagine the lives of others? Existing documents on the Kumbh are so focused on the bizarre that we miss images of the pilgrims themselves, the mundane, the little moments: families, children, living, eating.

Felix showed a short clip from Werner Herzog's "Land of Silence and Darkness," a film imaging life for a deaf-blind person. See the clip on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPUOpMYVmQ>.



Felix showed several clips from his photojournalism projects, focusing on landscape, surroundings, as examples of immersion journalism:

“Walking in the Wakhan” (Afghanistan) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buNflaFKSvQ&feature=plcp>

“Cabo Verde” (Cape Verde) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BeDb26MeJKc&feature=plcp>

You can’t take yourself out of the picture.

Thinking toward the Kumbh, how might we envision photojournalism as part of our project? Felix’s goal is to create a documentary on our experiences while we’re there. He envisions following 4-6 people through their research projects. A documentary focus on our experience would help us to learn without overstepping our boundaries; accept the subjectivity of our own “immersion” journalism, and facilitate permissions issues! Many questions remain, including how much we will be able to access directly.

Discussion:

Rahul says that with the anticipated crowds, much will be accessible.

How will we get into the akhara(s) and how get documentation? Diana is in conversation with Rampuri, hoping for other conversations as well.

Diana notes that the official Kumbh site has much about the media and permissions required; whatever one can do to prepare, we certainly will do. We will be moving around generally.

Rahul: Felix’s project suggests 2 different perspectives: (1) a documentation of the process and (2) in its final editing will have synergy with the research projects. As we go forward, let’s have lots of active conversations – Talk to Felix; also, everyone will have everyone else’s email. We need to have more footage that captures the place at night – what will be our encampment plan at night?

Diana: ISCON at night; also many of the religious theatrical dramas will occur at night

Design question: how to harness the photos we’ll take and georeference the space? The GSD team is working on guidelines for a method to capture such data. We need to plan time when the GSD students can tell us how they’re doing it, tell us how to program our cameras or IT devices, our need for more instruments.

Kalpesh: We’ll need compatible settings on cameras

Diana: Perhaps to discuss December 3.

Oscar: Let’s extend this to information in general – guidelines for sharing all of our information with the group as we help each other out.

Diana: She is in conversation with DP Dubey; he is having a conference on the Kumbh in February. He studies the mela throughout.

Discussion continues about the site ground plan. The layout map already prepared – but only has sectors; we need more details. Dubey says the map for 2013 is not so different from 2001, but chiefly larger (in part because so much more parking space)

3. Kalpesh Bhatt

Kalpesh is looking at religious aspects of the festival – what it really means. The Kumbh represents a confluence of Hindu traditions, including different ideologies, all in one place. This confluence is illustrated well by the meaning of the term “triveni” – it’s not where 3 separate things meet, but rather where 2 things meet and the third trail that results from their meeting.

In Hinduism there are five different dominant traditions, with three having the most influence: followers of Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi Shakti (the other two are worship of the sun and followers of Ganesh). These are theologically quite disparate.

Questions Kalpesh asks include: What can we by knowing more about the teachers of the traditional akharas? Leaders of modern Hindu organizations at the festival? The lay people? How do the different groups interact? How are they placed? For example, loudspeakers may be facing each other. He also wonders: Is there a history of why a certain group may *not* be placed next to another particular group? He would like the opportunity to interview one from a representative sample

First, looking at the teachers of the traditional akharas represented at the Kumbh, we see the diversity in lists of the All-India Akhara Council. The leading groups (Maha-Nirvani, Juna Akhara, and Maha Niranjini Akhara) are worshippers of Shiva. There are 3 Vaishnev akharas, 3 Sikh akharas; there is also the Kalpavasi.

He has information on where the different akharas are based in India; but not yet able to identify their location at the festival. Diana notes that Rampuri has invited us to visit; he has been in India 40 years. Many initiates in the Juna akhara are not in India (e.g. video several weeks ago of initiation of Danish and Swedish men).

Second, Kalpesh is looking at modern Hindu organizations that will be at the kumbh. These, too, usually follow one of the 5 or 3 leading traditions, but all have totally different ideologies, different ways of looking at the mela. For example:

- Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (“The Art of Living”) – minimize the ritual aspect and focus more on the teaching. He spoke here at Harvard a few years ago on the service dimension.
- Pujya Srivatsa Soswami
- Clean Ganga Campaign
- Ram Krishna mission – humanitarian services are a big aspect
- VHP (Vishnu Hindu Parishad). Kalpesh has asked Ashok Singhal; it is still unclear if he will meet with us.
- Swami Satyamitranandji – he has indicated a willingness to speak with us.

Third, what about the intersections that take place at the level of “lay people” – the ordinary pilgrims? How do diversities coexist and coalesce, even if temporarily, while they share space with the “religious other”? To what extent do they share sentiments of mutual acceptance and assimilation? Taken as a whole, addressing such questions can help us better understand pluralism within Hinduism.

Discussion

Rahul & Diana: These many questions are a reminder that we should have a handout of all the questions people are asking in their research, and how we as a group will ask questions on site. Need to plan.

Alykan: GSD group interested in markets, visiting the marketplaces, the akhara camps, the non-akhara camps, markets on the bridges, common toilet facilities; they envision capturing data on one instance of each, including measurements, looking at others for comparison, comparing morning and evening.

Coordinate mapping also with markets, flowers, roads, photos, interactions. Integrating the questions and the data will enrich the investigations and potential.

Diana: Wants to learn more about the daily routines in the encampments, at the ganga aratis (night-time lamp-offerings to the river). Are the lelas always in the evenings?



A student asks Kalpesh: VHP is both political and consists of religious pilgrims? Kalpesh replies: VHP is one of the biggest camps; it has a very social focus. Q: Are there other political parties present? Diana: VHP actually started at a Kumbh Mela, the early intentions being to bring together religious leaders on their own wavelength. The goal was to create an international voice for Hindus, from the idea that they lacked what other religions have in terms of ecumenical international gathering opportunities (such as the World Council of Churches for those of the Christian tradition, the Hajj for Muslims, etc.).

Q: Are there Islamic sites within the map? What happens when such large events take place in the area of sacred religious sites belonging to other traditions? The government normally protects such sites, but the question remains: what do they actually do? Diana: Traditional sites at the KM include the legendary sacred tree, the role of those who are supposed to be the ritual officiants of Prayag.

Diana: And what about the BOAT traffic? No one is paying attention to this. How does it move? How does it negotiate the pontoon bridges?

Next week: Green Kumbh / environmental issues

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://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k87818&login=yes>