

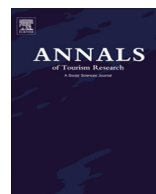


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# Emic understandings of Kumbh Mela pilgrimage experiences



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### ABSTRACT

This study interrogates pilgrims' motivations, activities and experiences of the 2013 Kumbh Mela pilgrimage, in Allahabad, India. It adopts an interpretive paradigm by so doing it responds to Eade's (1992) call for in-depth analyses that unveil the multifaceted nature of the pilgrim. The findings indicate that motives encompass a need for *spiritual connectivity* (devotion) and *spiritual knowledge attainment* (from saints). Two key activities occupied participants' time: *serving self* which included engaging in prayer, meditation, bathing in the revered River Ganges, listening to spiritual discourses, as well as *serving others* which entailed voluntary service endeavors. Descriptions of the experiential component encompassed experiences of *spirituality* and *social unity*. The study problematizes the nexus between pilgrimage tourism and participants perceived sense of solidarity.

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### Introduction

From time immemorial, pilgrimage sites worldwide have attracted large numbers of people, thus it is no wonder that this phenomenon has increasingly become a subject of academic inquiry (Bhardwaj,

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1983; Blackwell, 2007; Coleman & Eade, 2004; Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Vukonic, 1996). Scholars from geography, religious studies, anthropology, and cognate disciplines have examined pilgrimages to illustrate complex connections to various cultural, social, political, economic and/or environmental dimensions of society (Dubisch & Winkleman, 2005; Morinis, 1992; Shinde, 2011; Singh, 2011; Stausberg, 2011; Turner & Turner, 1978). Tourism scholars in particular have endeavored to bring awareness to the intricate junction between religion and tourism (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Vukonic, 1996). For instance, reconciling the traditional aspect of religiosity and the modern dimension of tourism, Sharpley and Sundaram (2005) argue that contemporary forms of tourism have evolved into “the functional and symbolic equivalent of more traditional religious practices” (p. 161). Similarly, Timothy and Olsen (2006) point to the ubiquity of religious markers (e.g., mosques, temples, churches, etc) within tourism promotional materials.

The prefatory accounts made by the aforementioned scholars offer a necessary discursive foundation on which tourism scholars have continued to contribute to pilgrimage studies by focusing on the activities nascent and actors present within pilgrimage spaces (Digance, 2003; Hudman & Jackson, 1992). The associated body of literature generally deals with the production and consumption facets associated with pilgrimage. From a production perspective, researchers have focused on management and planning issues related to a wide variety of pilgrimage sites as well as the overall ambience of such locales (see Raj & Morpeth, 2007). This body of literature highlights the active involvement of multiple governance levels and the intricate inner workings necessary to manage pilgrimage sites, which are increasingly dependent on tourism infrastructure (e.g., hotels, travel agencies, tourism offices, etc.) for their success (see Shinde, 2010 on religious entrepreneurs).

Drawing on a consumption lens, some researchers examine the experiences and characteristics of pilgrims. Earlier work on this matter focused on juxtapositions between pilgrims and tourists arguing that the two can be mapped on opposite ends of a continuum on which the former occupies the sacred end while the latter is situated on the secular end (Cohen, 1991; Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Raj & Morpeth, 2007; Smith, 1992). The creation of typologies evident in the aforementioned line of research was generally based on classifying attendants' motivations as religious (pilgrims) or non-religious (tourists); the former was regarded as someone in search of spirituality or religious absolution while the latter was motivated by curiosity. Such analyses drew on deductive research and although insightful, they occurred at the expense of in-depth interrogations of the experiences, characteristics and motivations articulated by pilgrimage attendees. Additionally, the binary oppositions (sacred/secular or tourist/pilgrim) employed drew on linear frameworks that were unable to account for the multiple ways through which humans interact with place (Doron, 2005; Maclean, 2009; Timothy & Olsen, 2006).

Studies, such as the one conducted by Hudman and Jackson (1992) indicate that pilgrimage travel often combines religious devotion and touristic pleasure. There is therefore support for the claim that the separation between tourists and pilgrims can be problematic particularly, when one takes into account the theory of intersectionality, which “foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology” that regards “social positions are relational” (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006, p. 187). From this vantage point, an individual undertaking a pilgrimage can simultaneously be positioned as a pilgrim and/or a tourist. It is important to note that current literature indicates that the dichotomy that existed until the early 2000s no longer exists (see Collins-Kreiner, 2010a). Recent studies have opened up discussions regarding the wide variety of reasons that motivate people to engage in pilgrimages (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; Stausberg, 2011). Examples of some documented motivations include: “[m]aking contact with the sacred, fulfilling a vow, seeking healing for physical or spiritual ailments, marking a life passage, doing penance, affirming cultural identity, and simple curiosity” (Dubisch & Winkleman, 2005, p. xiii).

Some studies focus on the plethora of meanings pilgrims ascribe to various religious or spiritual sites. Within tourism scholarship, Belhassen, Caton & Stewart's (2008) empirical work on evangelicals who travel to Israel draws on the intersections between theology and political science to illustrate the political motives that characterize travel to Israel by American evangelical groups. Similarly, Singh's (2011) work on the Varanasi pilgrimage in India discusses the role enacted by religious discourses in identity politics. Singh (2011) proposes that Hindu pilgrimages enable some Hindu groups “to assert their own power” and affirm Hindu identity particularly in the wake of “an ever visible Muslim population” (p. 287). Society has indeed witnessed an increase in travel motivated by religious or

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