

Introduction

New Motivations for Religious Travel in India

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Pilgrimage routes, flows of travelers, and sacred sites are imbued with the kinesthetic and transformative possibilities at the core of religious experience. Yet all the instruments agree—such experience is hard to measure: “Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage. The pilgrim physically traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage” (Turner and Turner 2011, 33). In undertaking religious travel, personal motivations for religious travel are complex, contingent, and cover the spectrum from introversion to extroversion, physical travel to inward journeying, and so on. How then shall we separate “religious journeying” from social and leisure travel?

While religious tourism is evidently “motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons,” Gisbert Rinschede maintained that religious tourism overlaps with cultural and heritage tourism, typically fulfilling “several motivations and other subordinate goals” (Rinschede 1992, 52). In India, the National Sample Survey Office of India (NSSO) reported the compound motivations of domestic travelers under categories ranked by “leading purpose,” or as the motive “but for which he/she would not have undertaken the trip.” As reported in 2014–2015, the highest-ranking purpose for domestic travel in India is “social” (85.9%), followed by “religious and pilgrimage” (8.3%).¹ In characterizing religious tourism in nations with

developing economies, Rinschede argued that for many, “religious tourism offers the only possibility of travel” (1992, 52). While this may hold true elsewhere, it is important to note that this scenario does not readily transfer to India. This is because modern travel infrastructure was developed in South Asia within decades of its emergence in Europe. Today, India’s transportation infrastructure includes vast inland waterways, one of the world’s largest and most heavily used passenger rail systems, a robust domestic air network, and roads that traverse routes used in antiquity to alpine engineering marvels numbered among the world’s highest navigable motorways.

Modern travel networks arose in India from the mid-nineteenth century onward, with the construction of the first passenger railway line (1853–1854), approximately a quarter century after steam locomotive technology was introduced in Britain (1825). Subsequently, the railways rapidly transformed India by remapping river transportation systems and premodern roadways within the new colonial networks of empire, expanding the frontiers of the accessible world and creating public spaces that mingled people differentiated by “social taxonomy,” such as caste, religious communities, and ethnicities in unprecedented ways (Prasad 2016, 61).² In 1951, the colonial-era rail was nationalized as “Indian Railways” and has since expanded into an entity that provides transportation service to over eight billion passengers annually or almost twenty-two million people daily (Indian Railways 2016). By the end of the twentieth century, the advent of mass-market air travel in India was made possible by the Indian government’s deregulation of the domestic aviation sector through a dispensation for “air-taxis” (1986) that was further expanded under the Open Sky Policy (1990).³ Looking ahead, the twenty-first-century rise and market penetration of discount airlines or low-cost carriers (LCCs), such as IndiGo, Jet Airways, and SpiceJet, have further expanded access to the global transportation network for citizens residing in secondary population centers and opened new routes of access for international and regional visitors to India.

At present, most domestic tourist visits in India continue to be undertaken by bus in rural areas (50%), while the bus and train are used almost equally in urban areas (34% and 31%, respectively) (NSSO 2016, Statement 3.13a). Yet in contrast to the overall preference for bus travel, rural travelers took the train for nearly a third of all religious journeys (28%), while urban travelers used the train for nearly 70% of all religious journeys (with bus use falling from 34% to 11%

overall) (NSSO 2016, Statement 3.13a). It is thus important to observe that mass transport for religious journeys in contemporary India continues to be facilitated by the railways, a connection that began in the colonial era, as discussed by scholars including Surinder Bhardwaj (1973, 151–152), Ian Kerr (2001, 312–315), and Ritika Prasad (2016, 166–167). In sum, the scope of travel possibilities in India is both well developed and expanding, so that contemporary pilgrims in India negotiate a world whose frontiers are almost unimaginably accessible and interconnected in comparison with that of recent generations.⁴

Mapping an Interdisciplinary Journey through Indian Religious Sites

The essays in this volume offer perspectives on religious journeying in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh, and they engage Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, as well as those whose personal identity challenges such regional and community formations. In a mosaic of diverse contexts, we explore intersecting and evolving motivations for religious travel in India—from exile and mission, to heritage and Hindutva—and discover new mappings of the sacred in interreligious and regional case studies from India.

All major sites discussed in this volume are located on map 1 (see map, pg. xiv). The essays in the first section, “Constructing Community Spaces,” investigate the ways in which groups interact with sites to generate and maintain particular communal identities. Opening the volume, Carla Bellamy, in “Making Sacred Islamic Space in Contemporary India,” examines frameworks of Muslim pilgrimages in India. She shows that, for many Muslims in India, visits to important shrines like those found at “Husain’s Hill” (Husain Tekri) in Madhya Pradesh are “articulated and accepted by some Muslims” in ways that suggest “that even in the modern, post-partition period, some South Asian Muslims exist within a spiritual landscape that posits more continuity than competition between Mecca and South Asia.”

In the next chapter, Joanna Cook describes how shared spaces are constructed when the travelers are Thai Buddhists in “Remaking Thai Buddhism through International Pilgrimage to South Asia.” Cook queries the notion that Thai Buddhist pilgrims become “more Buddhist” as a result of journeying to the original sites of the historical

Buddha's life in South Asia: Lumbini (birth), Bodhgaya (enlightenment), Sarnath (teaching), and Kushinagar (final death). In her richly illustrated ethnography, Cook fruitfully navigates the tension between the pilgrimage itself, translocal Buddhist religious identity, and a sense of "otherness" experienced by Thai Buddhist pilgrims to Buddhist sites in India and Nepal.

The final chapter of this section—Kiran A. Shinde's "Augmenting Pilgrimages: A Religious Theme Park in Shegaon, Maharashtra"—is occupied with a social space that might strike some as inherently non-spiritual: a religious theme park. Shinde brings readers to Anand Sagar, a religious theme park linked to Sant Gajanan Maharaj (1878–1908) in Shegaon, a small town in rural Maharashtra dominated by its identity as a saint's abode. In doing so, Shinde demonstrates the ways in which sacred, secular, and marketplace motivations coexist at Anand Sagar alongside the commercial instrumentality of a "theme park" and the spiritual sincerity of a religious space.

The second section, "Pilgrimage as Paradox," considers situations in which the ostensible purpose of the religious journey appears to be at odds with the form of the event, the presuppositions of the participants, and/or the stated aims of the organizers. That is, the four situations presented by the following authors provoke a certain cognitive dissonance. This section begins with Dibyesh Anand's study of the intersections of devotion to Ram and Hindutva nationalism in "Appropriating Ayodhya on 'Valor Day': Hindu Nationalism and Pilgrimage as Politics" (chapter 4). Through an examination of the rise of Hindutva and its spiritual claims, the author closely reads the activities and rhetoric of Hindu activist travelers to Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, speculating on the paradoxical effects of such journeys—and noting that pilgrimage in this sense is inextricable from a Hindu nationalist politics of fear. While the essays in the previous section develop the idea of unexpected personal and social identity formations at pilgrimage sites, Anand's contribution asks how religious journeys can be conceptualized when they are in the service of monumentalizing communal, ethnocentric violence.

Chapter 5, Robbie B. H. Goh's "Bihar as Christian Anti-Pilgrimage Site: Missions, Evangelism, and Religious Geography," searches for ways to interpret religious travel within a space perceived by the travelers themselves as a "spiritual vacuum." Goh details the perception of Bihar by Indian Christian missionaries as a

“graveyard of missions” due to high failure rates of Christian conversions. At a site that is characterized by its lack of coreligionists, Goh argues that the dearth of Christian conversions can paradoxically function as a kind of stimulus that draws in activity, encouraging religious travel by Indian Christian missionaries through the very nature of this spiritual challenge.

Alex Norman engages with a different sort of paradox in “Seeking the Self in a Land of Strangers: New Religiosity and the Spiritual Marketplace of Rishikesh” (chapter 6) through reflection on Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, as an international center for “spiritual tourists.” Focusing on the appeal of Rishikesh, particularly amongst visitors from the U.K., Europe, Australia, and North America, Norman analyzes religious tourism activities within sites overtly marketed as places for spiritual development. As he discusses, the “spiritual marketplace” of Rishikesh operates outside the boundaries of conventional religious institutions and settings and serves to dislocate “spirituality” from the types of shrines and sites associated with conventional site-based religious travel.

Finally, John Whalen-Bridge’s “Proxy Pilgrimage: Seeing Tibet in Dharamsala, India” traces the ways in which pilgrimage is transformed when forced into new paradigms by political circumstances. Whalen-Bridge’s chapter focuses on religious travel to Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh—the current home of the Dalai Lama—to show how roadblocks to religious travel in Tibet are negotiated. The author locates such pilgrimage in a modernist Vajrayana discourse, represented by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche’s travel guide for Buddhist pilgrims, which integrates the paradox of proxy sites of pilgrimage within a framework of spirituality. In this sense, the role of Dharamsala as a surrogate for “Tibet” is both central *and* peripheral to how religious travel is perceived by religious travelers to Dharamsala as “Little Tibet.”

The role of multiple, overlapping motivations dominates in the third section “Reversals and Revisions,” which charts the ways which obstacles that might appear antithetical to a religious activity are incorporated into the activity, conditioning the religious journey in important ways. In chapter 8, “The Power of the ‘Little Hajj’: Memory, Ritual, and Pilgrimage in South Indian Islam,” Afsar Mohammad offers insight into Muslim pilgrimage at three different sites in Andhra Pradesh: Penukonda, Nellore, and Gugudu. Mohammad

demonstrates that Indian Muslims who do not have the means to make the journey to Mecca, Saudi Arabia for the hajj—one of the five pillars of Islam—find alternate ways to monumentalize and sacralize parts of their religious inheritance so that new, multilayered sacred spaces come into being in India itself. In the next chapter, “What Are Sikhs Doing at ‘Historical Gurdwaras’ If They’re Not on Pilgrimage? Saints, Dust, and Memorial Presence at Sikh Religious Places,” Andrea Marion Pinkney reflects on travel to Sikh religious sites. Characterizing the normative position of Sikh religious authorities as “anti-pilgrimage and pro-gurdwara,” Pinkney reviews key Sikh religious texts’ statements on pilgrimage—and the metaphor of dust which, she argues, bears a second layer of significance as a charismatic substance or “matter” that connects contemporary Sikh pilgrims to the saints memorialized at historical gurdwaras and other Sikh religious places.

The tenth chapter, Rodney Sebastian’s “‘Reverse Pilgrimage’: Performance, Manipuri Identity, and the Ranganiketan Cultural Arts Troupe,” takes readers to Manipur, a state in India’s northeast region in which the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been in effect since 1958. In an environment where the stability of civic life faces systemic and long-term challenges, Sebastian maps new formations of Manipuri religious identity through the performances of Ranganiketan as a kind of “reverse pilgrimage” (Davidson and Gitlitz 2002, 522).⁵ By bringing culturally specific forms of art and ritual activities outside of Manipur’s contested landscape, Sebastian shows how Ranganiketan combines religio-cultural and financial motivations with a mission of bringing religious and cultural connections abroad to newcomers and devotees denied the chance to return home.

Chapter 11 concludes the volume by turning to unexpected kinds of identity formation in Roberta Wollons’s “Imagined Place: American Women’s Missionary Journeys in Southern India.” Wollons’s chapter introduces American women Congregational missionaries who were trained to convert Indian women to Christianity, but who had a change of itinerary when their activity resulted in the founding of women’s colleges. In closing the volume, Wollons critically suggests that religious travel can contribute to unexpected revisions to the self, as experienced by women journeying on “missions” to India.

In conclusion, pilgrimages, religious retreats, missionary work, and religious tourism are all ways to construct selves, even as these experiences impart lessons in self-deconstruction as well. In these authors’ explorations, religious, regional, national, transnational, and personal forms of identity are both transformed and reinforced through

religious journeying. By looking beyond the boundaries of conventional pilgrimages, we invite readers to join us at the margins of scholarship on religion and travel—and to appreciate India on its own terms as a religious travel destination and as a landscape for religious constructions, paradoxes, and, indeed, reversals.

Notes

This project has been supported by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (Religion Cluster and South Asian Studies Programme) and the Asia Research Institute, which jointly sponsored a workshop in Singapore on “Religious Travel in India” in 2012. At McGill University, funding was provided for student research interns by the Faculty of Arts Research Internship Program (ARIA) and a McBurney Fellowship (School of Religious Studies). In bringing this to press, the editors gratefully acknowledge Nancy J. Ellegate and Diane Ganeles at the State University of New York Press for their editorial support, and our research assistants at McGill University: Geneviève Mercier-Dalphonf (2014), Sarah Sachiye Purdy (2015), Kelly Christine Wong (2016), and Henria Aton (2017).

1. Aside from social and religious trips (94.2% of all domestic travel), all other trips comprised just 5.8% of domestic travel, including education, training, and business: “Social trips were the most common ones among the trips completed during last 30 days (501.9 lakhs overnight trips at all-India level) followed by trips for religious & pilgrimage leading purpose (4.85 lakhs trips)” (NSSO 2017 Appendix A, A-131). For details, see NSSO 2016, table 20, reporting the all-India rural and urban composite data on “Average expenditure (in ₹) per overnight trip by categories of expenditure for each leading purpose completed during last 365 days” (NSSO 2016, table 20).

2. See also Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

3. For discussion of the air-taxi dispensation under Rajiv Gandhi, see Rahul Mukherji and Gaurav Kankanhalli, “Civil Aviation in India: An Exploration in the Political Economy of Promoting Competition,” ISAS Working Paper No. 97 (2009). For analysis of the impact of low-cost carriers in India, consult India Knowledge at Wharton, “India’s Airline Industry Consolidates, but Change Is Still in the Air,” 2008, <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/indias-airline-industry-consolidates-but-change-is-still-in-the-air/>.

4. For details on the history of railways in India, see Ian J. Kerr, *Railways in Modern India* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). For consideration of the impact of the railways on colonial India, see Ritika Prasad, “‘Time-Sense’: Railways and Temporality in Colonial India,” *Modern*

Asian Studies 47 (2013): 1252–1282, and Ritika Prasad, “Railway Time: Speed, Synchronization, and ‘Time-Sense’” (chapter 4) in *Tracks of Change*, 134–164.

5. As defined by Davidson and Gitlitz, a reverse pilgrimage is “a journey by a revered object of pilgrimage from its normal setting to the locales of its devotees” (2002, 522).

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