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THE GEOGRAPHY OF HINDU PILGRIMAGE IN INDIA: FROM TREND TO PERSPECTIVE

Pilgrimage studies: recent trend

Pilgrimage has been major motive of movement and migration of people since ancient past. The early narratives of Chinese travellers Fa-hsien (early 5th c.) and Hsuan-tsang (early 7th c.) to India remind the tradition of sacred journeys in quest of experiencing awe, wonder, mysticism and special places of power. Obviously there is difference between pilgrimage and tourism, nevertheless the structural similarities between them are also acceptable. Pilgrimages are primarily religious journeys in nature. It is a universal phenomena and belongs to human experience of sanctity of place, generating a particular pilgrim behaviour in journey and rituals performed as expressed in the ties between the religious attitude and lived space, and also the symbolic expression involved therein referring to the cosmic understanding of human being (Osterrieth 1997). Pilgrims, pilgrimage centres, pilgrim circulation, associated sacred ecology and psychosomatic views of pilgrims are the main concern in peregrinology (cf. Sopher 1967, 53-54 also 1968), where space, place and movement form the spatial queues. Journey, circulation, and sacred experiences are the three basic phenomena of Hindu pilgrimage.

In Hinduism, pilgrimage is believed to be the most important and merit-giving act. Pilgrimage as a rite of passage involves three stages of function: "initiation" (from awareness to start), "liminality" (the journey itself and experiences), and "reaggregation" (the homecoming). According to the ancient narration of the *Rig Veda*, dated ca 13th c. BCE, the notion of "tirtha" (sacredscape) symbolises at least four connotations in ancient Hindu literature: (I) a route going to a place where one can receive manifestive power; (II) the bank of a river where one can take holy dip as rite of purification; (III) a sacred site where

lies the power of manifestation; and (IV) the religious territory which became sacred due to divine activities and work of the god/s. In all these connotations spatio-cultural dimension lies in the background.

There are two polarised ways to study pilgrimage. The one is nomothetic, looking for normative laws and generalisations in a particular way; it is close to positivistic approach. The other is ideographic which leaving aside the laws and generalisation, reflects the object's specific, individual qualities either through text or context, or taking both together. The former was common among geographers during 1960s and 1970s; while the latter still dominates in the Indological studies.

Historical perspective

In Indological tradition the anthology edited by Gopal and Dubey (1990), and Bakker (1990) are the notable works. Bakker's volume is based on the panels of the VII World Sanskrit Conference, and the nine essays there deal with the history of sacred places in India as reflected in traditional literature. Sacred centres as the object of political interest is the focal theme of another anthology by Bakker (1992).

Taking the first part of Narayana Bhatt's *Tristhalisetu* (cf. CE 1580) Saloman (1985) has produced a critical edition with detailed notes and comparison with other contemporary texts. Dubey's works (2001, 2001 ed.) on Prayaga/Allahabad and the pilgrimage festivities held there, are mostly based on "puranic mahatmya" literature and treatises. The "mahatmya" literature (the *Puranas*) provide mythological stories as to how, why, to whom in and in which manner pilgrimage to be performed (cf. Bhardwaj, 1973: 58-75). In total they describe how the pilgrimage symbolises spiritual progress and how it would be beneficial in getting relief from sins and worldly affairs. During medieval period many digests and treatises were written – all describing the glory of various holy places in different ways at different magnitudes. These descriptions, in fact, are the rearrangement and selections from the "puranas" with commentaries.

The historical perspective, Indological context and spatial frame have been admirably integrated by Bakker (1986) in his magnum opus, *Ayodhya*, which covers history, religious activities, puranic description, "mahatmya" literature and critical appraisal of the source materials available. His colleague, Entwistle (1987) has produced a similar volume on Braj. Both of these works are inspired by their teacher, Jacob Ensink (1974) whose own work has paved the path in this direction.

Geographical context: circulation, typology and cosmic frame

The first detailed bibliography on pilgrimages with a short introduction was prepared by Singh (1987, 525-564). The widely cited catalogue-type descriptive works on holy places of India, include Dave's (1957-61, 4-vols.) work on 120

places, the Gita Press: *Kalyana's Tirthank* (1957; covering about thousand places), and Mishra's edited *Sanmarga: Tirtha Visheshank* (1987, 64 essays). On global level two books on the geography of pilgrimages published by Antoni Jackowski (1991) in Polish are still known for its comprehensive coverage.

In a recent study (Malse and Ghode 1989), following gazetteer-approach and cartography the place description of Pandharpur has been narrated; this study lacks integration of texts, context and symbology. A leading Indian geographical journal by publishing an anthology on the geography of pilgrimages and has attempted to pave the path of peregrinology (Singh and Singh 1987). Out of nine essays in this volume, four deal with India; and the one notable is on geography of pilgrimages in Poland by Antoni Jackowski.

The phenomenon of circulation with reference to spatial manifestation has been analysed by Sopher (1968) in his pioneering study of *Pilgrim circulation in Gujarat*. Of course, heavily impressed by nomothetic approach, he has also correlated the social characteristics, and finally posed several issues for exploring the role of cultural determinants in pilgrimage. Another in-depth study is presented by Bhardwaj (1973), who based on pilgrims' responses tried to prepare five-level hierarchy of holy places. A detailed investigation of circulation in Hindu pilgrimage is further described by Bhardwaj (1985). Analysing the relationship between pilgrim circulation and past politico-cultural influence, Spencer (1969, 52-56) has noted a sort of symbiotic relationship. The anthropological purview of circulation is tested in case of pilgrimage to Amarnath by Aziz (1982).

First explicit geographical classification in terms of geographic scale, frequency and routes was proposed by Stoddard (1966) and finally twenty four categories are marked. This classification is more nomothetic abstract and gives less emphasis on the belief system and phenomenology of religion. Bharati (1963, 1970) was pioneering in presenting the typological frame of pilgrimage centres on the basis of regional frame and their importance.

With respect to belief systems and practices as prescribed in the texts and as experienced by the pilgrims, the holy places may be classified into three groups: (I) "Water-site", associated mostly with sacred bath on an auspicious occasion, (II) "Shrine site", related to a particular deity and mostly visited by the pilgrims belong to, or attached to a particular sect or deity, and (III) "circuit area" (*Kshetra*), the journey of which gives a special merit as it has preserved some form/system of cosmic "mandala" like in case of Varanasi, Mathura, Ayodhya, etc. The best known work on ranking based on Sanskrit texts is presented by Saloman (1979).

The concept of "pilgrimage mandala" is introduced by Singh (1987a) with the study of fifty-six pilgrimage journey routes in Varanasi. The numerical symbolism and its cosmic association are described in terms of varieties of divinities, location and rout-affinity and also compared the festivities - all with respect to text and context. This study has been further expanded in the light of sacred topography and religious images (Singh 1988). The imagery study is, in fact, has link with his previous work on religion and tourism (Singh 1982).

Ambrose's (1982) study also throws a fresh light on this aspect. These studies provide a new way to understand the miraculous intervention, and cultural pattern of miracles, and ultimately to the understanding of cosmic implosion (Preston 1986). The cosmic interpretation of the holy places is also narrated by Morinis (1984, 284-290) in his classical study of pilgrimage tradition in West Bengal. Also, Eck (1986, 41-55) in her study of cosmos and paradise of Varanasi has projected this aspect. Exploring the religious geography by interpreting texts through uncovering a multitude of intersecting, overlapping and disconnected regions that co-exist in the western part of India, Feldhaus has explained the intricacy of regional identity and the role of "sacredness" (Feldhaus 2003).

Anthropological dimension

In his pioneering work on sacred complex of Gaya and Kashi, Vidyarthi (1961, also Vidyarthi, et al. 1979) had taken three aspects of the study, i.e. sacred geography, sacred performances, and sacred functionaries. At the grass root level an in-depth anthropological study with deeply integrated insight is produced by Alan Morinis (1984) based on detailed study of the three holy places in West Bengal, viz. Tarakeshvar, Navadvip and Tarapitha. The well-known anthology on geography of pilgrimages (Morinis and Stoddard 1997), deals with six Indian pilgrimages out of eighteen essays.

A work based on detailed field investigation dealing with gender and politics in Himalayan pilgrimage (Nanda Devi) was presented by Sax (1991). Toomey (1989) discussed the importance of food in pilgrimage with the case study of Mount Govardhan. Gold's (1988) great work of exploration and deep thought on Rajasthani pilgrimage combines intimate sensing, experiential feelings and religious understanding and finally provides a unique account of peregrinology. She says: "Mostly I tell what people did and what they said about what they did, and what they said about what they did, to each other and to me" (ibid. xiii).

International conferences and proceedings

With the initiative of Makhan Jha in the XI *International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*, ICAES, held at Vancouver in 1983 a special session on pilgrimage (mostly based on India) was organised and later on selected papers were published (Jha 1985). Most of these papers deal with sacred places, like Tirupati, Mithila, Ujjain, Puri, etc. In 1988 under XII ICAES another symposium was held at Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and proceedings was published in which out of twenty, seventeen essays referred to India (Jha 1991). In the history of pilgrimage studies Conference on *Pilgrimage: The Human Quest*, held at University of Pittsburgh in May 1988, has been referred as milestone (Morinis 1992). Its proceedings consists of twelve papers. In Hindu context, two of these essays dealing with spiritual magnetism, and pilgrimage-tourism, by Preston (1992), and Cohen (1992) are the best known theoretical discussion

on this theme. A multidisciplinary International Conference on *Pilgrimage and Complexity* held in January 1999, and its proceedings consists of thirteen papers, including on Varanasi and Gaya (Malville and Saraswati 2004). In the three recently held conferences, viz. the 3rd *International Convention of Asia Scholars*, Singapore: 19-22 August 2003, the 18th *European International Conference on Modern South Asian Studies*, Lund: 6-9 July 2004, and the 19th *World Congress of History of Religions*, Tokyo: 24-30 March 2005, a panel on pilgrimage and sacred places' with emphasis on spirit of place, heritage preservation, and ecological harmony, respectively, had been organised by Rana Singh, and the proceedings are in the process of publication.

The Society of Pilgrimage Studies (Allahabad) has also sponsored a few of the seminars on pilgrimage on the occasion of Ardhya/ Kumbha Mela and published the proceedings (Gopal and Dubey 1990; Dubey 2000, 2001); most of the papers deal with historical, Indological and statistical contexts of pilgrimages.

Hindu pilgrimage: Victor Turner's theoretic construct

Victor Turner had been the pioneer that created a model for studying pilgrimage within a social context. The main focuses of Turner's research in Rhodesia were the so-called rites of passage. During the ritual, the person is status-less. Turner called this particular part of the ritual the "liminal phase" (limen Lat.), threshold). Rites of passage often take place outside of the community in which the initiation to a new stage of life takes place. Turner saw a strong sense of unity among the novices during this liminal phase, which contrasted the structure of the society they normally live in. Difference in status among them did not seem to matter anymore since people from all classes and families appeared to form a homogenous group. Turner called this sense of unity 'communitas'. After returning to the original community, everyone however takes on again its old position and status. Communitas, because of its contrast to the structure of society, is therefore described by Turner as "anti-structure". By doing so he replaces, at least for the field of pilgrimage, the Durkheimian theory that religion has a positive influence on social structure, as explicitly in Hinduism. Though both see pilgrimage primarily as a social act, their views on the effect it has on society are opposite. Within the Durkheimian school it is thought of as reaffirming social structure, whereas the Turnerian school sees pilgrimage as a factor of renewal within society.

One of the case studies of pilgrimage that Turner described in his book *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (1975) is the pilgrimage to Pandharpur in Maharashtra (India). He uses the work of G.A. Deleury (Turner 1975, 194) and Irawathy Karve (Turner 1975, 205) as his sources. Already here we can see the first problems with the idea of "communitas", since it only exists within the separate groups that undertake this pilgrimage. The same pilgrimage forms the subject of J.M. Stanley's contribution (1992), who too notices a problem in applying the term communitas to all cases of pilgrimage. While Turner still spoke of

"existential *communitas*" in the Pandharpur case, Stanley brings it down to "normative *communitas*". He clearly discerns in this group-structured-pilgrimage the boundaries that are brought about by social structure.

Several anthropologists discovered that in many cases of pilgrimage, there was no *communitas* to be found at all. Rather, social structures were maintained throughout the entire pilgrimage. Unlike Stanley, they do not try to hold on to Turners ideas of "*communitas*" as anti-structure. This situation prevails in most of the sacred places in India. Through his pioneering work on pilgrimage in Bengal Morinis has further approved this statement (Morinis 1984, 274). It is also noted that when every aspect of pilgrimage seems to be either social, political or economical, it can still be seen as a "bounded entity", a separate analytical category. Most of the anthropologists agreed on the fact that it cannot.

In an attempt to restore pilgrimage as an analytical category, J.E. Llewellyn, in the introduction to his study of the 1998 *Kumbha Mela in Hardvar*, turns to the notion of the sacred as the factor that distinguishes the goal of the pilgrim from centres of political or economical activity. He acknowledges that this could bring along the danger of discarding all secular aspects of pilgrimages as unimportant compared to the elevated "sacredness". He quotes *Eck and Eliade*, who both ascribe an ontological status to "the sacred", to illustrate this danger. Without denying or acknowledging the existence of "the sacred", Llewellyn decides only to study the visible, unknowing of "what lies behind it" (Llewellyn 2001, 4-12). This leads to an attitude of methodological agnosticism in which Llewellyn studies pilgrimage to a certain degree from an insider's perspective. The sacred cannot serve as a means for interpretation since it is not an empirical category. Pilgrimage will therefore be studied from an outsider's perspective as well, without making any ontological judgements about the sacred. The boundaries of the term "pilgrimage" are set by emic concepts, but it is studied from an etic perspective.

Hindu pilgrimage: Bhardwaj

The cultural geographer Bhardwaj (1973) classified pilgrimage sites with respect to the size of the area from which pilgrims are drawn (catchment area) serves as the basic criterion for the rank of a sacred place in this classification. At the top stand the so-called "pan-Hindu sites", to which Hindus from all over the world make pilgrimages. Varanasi/ Kashi is the example of this category. At the bottom of the list one finds "local shrines" that are visited only by people from the direct surroundings.

Having made a ranking list of sacred places according to the size of their catchment areas, Bhardwaj finds that there is a correlation between the caste composition of pilgrims at sacred places and the ranking of this place in his hierarchy. People who visit pan-Hindu or supra-regional shrines are generally from higher castes than those who visit regional or local shrines (Bhardwaj 1973, 188-192). In addition, he finds that the motives for pilgrimage vary between places of different rankings as well. Pilgrimages to the highest levels

of shrines are made to gain spiritual merit, whereas pilgrimages to lower level shrines have more tangible purposes. Bhardwaj calls the latter "specific pattern" (Bhardwaj 1973, 169-172). His generalisations are supported by recent works (Rana Singh, 2003).

Morinis criticises Bhardwaj in his case study of West Bengal (Morinis 1984, 234-236). His criticism has been taken over and expanded by Llewellyn (2001, 8). To some extent both of them present valid objections to Bhardwaj's theory. Morinis' main objection is that Bhardwaj's findings only fit the situation in Himachal Pradesh, the area where Bhardwaj did his research. Moreover, he argues that Hindu pilgrims have their own rankings of sacred places with much variety from one region to another, and that there is hardly any correspondence of these with Bhardwaj's system (Morinis 1984: 235). This is something Bhardwaj himself had already acknowledged (Bhardwaj 1973: 226). His system is etic and has no other claims than being an analytical tool in geographical research.

Ann Grodzins Gold (1998), in her Rajasthani fieldwork found a similar distinction between pilgrimage destinations. The pilgrims discern two types of pilgrimage. The pilgrimages to local shrines, referred to by the villagers as "jatra" (a Rajasthanised form of Sanskrit "yatra"), were undertaken for clearly defined purposes. The term yatra on the other hand, was used by the Rajasthani villagers to denote pilgrimage to distant shrines without a specific tangible purpose but for "merit" (Gold 1998, 136-146). Gold's study provides the necessary material to show that Bhardwaj's findings can be applied outside Himachal Pradesh as well.

The problem of self-interest, as Llewellyn shows, is a central theme in the study of Hindu pilgrimage. In a review article on three books on Hindu pilgrimage he concludes that 'there are likely to be "political" motivations at work, even when the pilgrims themselves claim that they are only interested in pilgrimage for its own sake' (Llewellyn 1998, 263). The distinction between interested and non-interested pilgrimage is taken too far by Llewellyn when he uses the terms selfish and unselfish and then it becomes useless. Rather the distinction should be kept a bit more modest.

Morinis' semantic model

Morinis not only questions Bhardwaj's hierarchy of pilgrimage sites and Turner's "communitas" theory, but also finds that no existing theories provide a useful basis for analysis of his material of Bengali pilgrimage (Morinis 1984, 275). He notices that only two characteristic features of pilgrimage occur in all types of pilgrimage. These are "sacred places" and "the act of journeying itself". Though this touches the essence of the institution, Morinis finds it unsatisfactory since it only deals with the surface of the phenomenon: "When one begins to ask questions such as why Bengali Hindus undertake pilgrimages, and how such practices gain acceptance within wider patterns of Bengali Hindu culture, the answers must be sought in more abstract levels of culture than the observable" (ibid. 276).

Morinis discerns two sets of meanings of pilgrimage. The first is 'the explicit understanding of the participants themselves' and the second consists of "*the literary and theological depictions of the cosmos and man's journey through it which are an integral (if unconscious to most pilgrims) aspect of the Hindu pilgrimage tradition*" (ibid. 277). Here he seems to solely search for religious meanings of pilgrimage without an open eye to social, political and economical aspects. He replaces anthropological theories on pilgrimage by a theology of Hindu pilgrimage.

In the context of second "set of meanings", Morinis suddenly considers Hinduism a homogenous religion and provides a highly Eliadan and cosmological explanation of sacred places and pilgrimage (Morinis 1984, 282-299). First for presenting a hierarchy of sacred places that is not held by all Hindus (ibid. 235), while Bhardwaj doesn't even claim to do so. Morinis takes the meaning of the architecture of Hindu temple as a basis for interpreting the Hindu concept of sacred space and sacred places, and comes up with an interpretation of sacred space as a model of the cosmos. Morinis's basic constructs fully fit in case of many pan-India level sacred places in both ways, viz. the function and use of sacred places, and the psychic world of devout pilgrims.

At the very end of his book, in a footnote, Morinis comes back to Bhardwaj, suggesting that in the end there is no difference between material and spiritual pilgrimage. "*It may be rather that participants are tapping different levels of meaning according to their familiarity with the explicit and implicit meaning of the institution*" (Morinis 1984, 298). All pilgrimages are a journey of the soul to the One, only the pilgrims themselves do not know it. When geographical, political or economical factors that participants are usually unaware of, are taken into account in an analysis of Hindu pilgrimage, it is done because the researcher has the purpose to learn something about pilgrimage from a geographical, political or economical point of view.

The task ahead

If Habermasian three-tier typology of science and explanation to be examined together then Hindu pilgrimage studies may be thought of in a better way:

- Empirical-analytical approach is based on direct experience, where the "facts speak for themselves"; and ultimately it led to develop positivism, e.g. Sopher's (1968) study.
- Hermeneutic approach is based on perception through a system of meanings which are human constructs and developed by each individual process of human contact, e.g. Gold (1988).
- Critical approach conceives people as part of culture-world created and manifested by them as ways of ensuing, both individual, day-to-day and collective, generational survival, e.g. Singh (1993a, b).

In studying pilgrimage tradition (in India) at least four broad methods to be used in balanced form are: statistical-spatial, literary-textual, contextual-experiential, and psychological- linguistic; altogether a multidisciplinary methodology

with respect to human science paradigm is required to understand and explain pilgrimage. How "spiritual magnetism" at a sacred site derives from human concepts and values, via historical, geographical, cultural and faith forces also needs special attention. Turners' (1978) analogy that "pilgrimage is exteriorised mysticism while mysticism is an interior pilgrimage" is still not tested by scholars of pilgrimage or cultural studies. Such study would be benefited with the use of alchemy – after all we need to understand the ultimate reality and place of human being in cosmos.

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GEOGRAFIA HINDUISTYCZNYCH PIELGRZYMEK W INDIACH.

TENDENCJE I PERSPEKTYWY

STRESZCZENIE

Istnieją dwa odrębne sposoby studiowania pielgrzymek. Jeden nomotetyczny, szukający praw i generalizacji, jest bliski podejścia pozytywistycznego. Drugi idiograficzny skupia się na specyficznych, indywidualnych własnościach, albo poprzez tekst albo kontekst lub też oba jednocześnie. Ten ostatni wciąż dominuje w badaniach nad pielgrzymkami w Indiach.

Studia nad tradycjami pielgrzymkowymi w Indiach stosują w zrównoważony sposób cztery szerokie grupy metod: statystyczno-przestrzenne, literacko-tekstowe, kontekstowo-doświadczeniowe, oraz psychologiczno-lingwistyczne. Taka wielodyscyplinarna metodologia pozwala najpełniej uchwycić i wyjaśnić zjawisko pielgrzymek.

