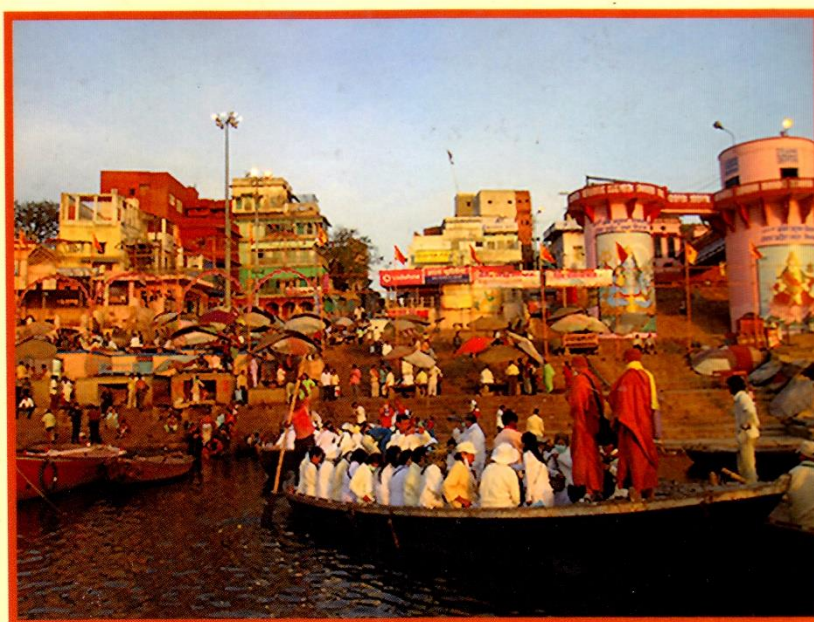


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Religious Journeys in India

Pilgrims, Tourists, and Travelers



Edited by

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In the Hindu tradition, a *tīrtha-yātrā* (religious journey) serves as a quest to know the divine and to maintain cultural identity, and, over time, has undergone many transformations. Used 5000 years ago in the *Vedas*, and today a Hindi term, *tīrtha* etymologically connotes 'crossing' from mundane to sacred, and after 'deep' experiences returning to the mundane. A vast amount of literature captures various facets of pilgrimages and incorporates a wide range of approaches—from academic to theological, from confessional to personal—transcending disciplinary and multi-disciplinary boundaries. Andrea Pinkney and John Whalen-Bridge's *Religious Journeys in India* focus on the 'motivations' at the centre of religious travels in India (p. 1) and describe pilgrims, tourists, and travellers at these sites. As the editors contend in their introduction, "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" (p. 6). Richly illustrated with examples from Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh (see map 1, p. xiv), the volume examines a range of major religious congregations in India, including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs.

Pilgrimage studies is now accepted as an interdisciplinary research topic, as well as a heritage resource. With case studies arranged in three compelling thematic sections, this anthology of eleven multidisciplinary essays provides a new dimension to pilgrimage and religious tourism studies that will be helpful for the coming generation of scholars. However, since the classical period, the crux of pilgrimage in India (especially in the Hindu tradition) has been marked by such concepts as 'deep faith', spiritual quests, rituals, sacredscapes, and the complex web of belief systems (cf. Singh and Rana, 2023a); these issues are only considered marginally in the case studies in this anthology. In addition, while these chapters broadly deal with sacred space, geographers and other scholars may be frustrated by the lack of spatial

representation (such as maps) in most of the essays.

In the first section, *Constructing Community Spaces*, Carla Bellamy's sociological discussion of Islamic sacred space provides a systematic overview of the context and linkages between locality and universality. It is illustrated with a case study of the Shia shrine of Husain Tekri in Madhya Pradesh, which is conceived as an archetype of Mecca. There should have been a critical appraisal of Muslim shrines in the Indian continent to present contrasts and similarities between such sacred spaces. In Chapter 2, Joanna Cook utilises participant observation among Thai Buddhists to construct a frame in which landscape is perceived and practised for religious construction, contestations, paradoxes, and reversals. Citing Laurajane Smith (2006), Cook argues that "pilgrims treat the sites as a 'witness' to the historicity and tradition" (p. 57), even if the site is localised in a different historical and cultural context than their own. She rightly concludes that the sacred landscapes (in this case, Buddhist) are created and re-created and made alive by pilgrims. Finally, in Chapter 3, Kiran Shinde examines a place associated with Dattātreya, a patron deity of the *Avadhūta* cult, which recently emerged as a regional pilgrimage site in Maharashtra, presenting an example of place-convergence. The introduction of a religious park there threatens both the site's religious image and tourism because it caters relatively more to pleasure and relaxation, leading to commodification (p. 85). However, this site requires a more rigorous study of how the spirit of the place is maintained and/or transformed by taking into consideration visitors' perceptions and experiences.

The second section, *Pilgrimage as Paradox*, consists of four essays. Examining the political strategy of Hindu Nationalism, Dibyesh Anand, in Chapter 4, frames politics at the pilgrimage site of Ayodhya within the context of dissonance and contestation. This chapter attempts to raise the issue of monumentalising communal and ethnocentric violence but, unfortunately, only marginally touches upon the grassroots realities of Hindu-Muslim interfaces and inter-

community interaction. The statement that “Ayodhya has become a revered place for Hindus” (p. 112) can no way be historically or culturally justified, as the city has already been a central Hindu pilgrimage site since at least the CE 7th-8th centuries—hundreds of years before the introduction of Islam—as narrated in the ancient epics.

In Chapter 5, Robbie Goh presents a compelling argument concerning the Christian movement and conversions in the Indian state of Bihar, which he presents sympathetically as a “graveyard of missions” (p. 123). Goh also presents many negative aspects, including nicknames and propaganda rhetoric about Bihar, one of India’s most impoverished states, but it marginally touches upon its rich history and culture. Arguing that Christians in Bihar practice “anti-pilgrimage” (p. 136) as a phenomenon of spiritual flows, Goh suggests that there is a “spiritual dearth”—or lack of spiritual grounding among Christians—in the state. Specifically, he states, “[n]ew constructions that tend to invest new sites with an abundance of signification similar to that found at ancient sites, ... also points to the opposite kind of construction: the creation of sites of spiritual void” (p. 137). This notion of anti-pilgrimage is compelling in this case, but, in a broad sense, it does not support the whole gamut of pilgrimages in India (cf. Singh and Rana, 2023 b). Alex Norman’s case study of Rishikesh, which he calls a “spiritual marketplace” (p. 143), illustrates how a ‘pilgrimage’ site can transform itself into a place of ‘spiritual tourism’, leading to new religiosity through a massive influx of Western visitors. This is an example of interfaces between sacred (*pavitrik*, or *parālaukik*) and profane (*laukik*, or *samsārik*) characters of the place, which sometimes creates tensions. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s catchphrase of postmodernity (1997, as cited on p. 163), he argues that ‘re-purposing and recycling’ (p. 161) is suited to project the transforming religious landscape of Rishikesh. Finally, closing out the section is co-editor John Whalen-Bridge’s examination of what he calls “proxy pilgrimage” (pp. 183-184). Here, he argues that processes and attributes of spiritual tourism, as well as the

superimposition of commodification of an authentic pilgrimage site over time, have helped to develop a full-fledged ‘Little Tibet’ or a ‘substitute Tibet’ at Dharmashala (in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India).

The last section of the volume is titled Reversals and Revisions, and includes four interesting chapters that collectively examine how religious activity conditions the journey. In Chapter 8, Afsar Mohammad considers the interface between locality and universality at South Indian Muslim shrines. The chapter reflects on alternative ways to monumentalise and sacralise a place’s religious inheritance of a family in a way that promotes the reinforcement of relationships with a new body and mind (p. 214). His concluding remarks are true of other Sufi places in India: “[m]ost pilgrims understand their pilgrimage as a network one builds between an ordinary being and an extraordinary being that co-exists alongside questions of caste and community identity” (p. 214). Co-editor Andrea Marion Pinkney then examines the curious paradoxes of Sikh heritage and pilgrimage in Chapter 9. There is no orthodoxy of pilgrimage in the Sikh religion; the *darshan* (‘auspicious glimpse’) of sacred places related to the Gurus is considered the most pious act, along with using dust and water from the site as a sacred gift used in domestic rituals. Memorial and devotional motivations are quests for deeper feelings (p. 240). In Chapter 10, Rodney Sebastian argues that the Rangniketan festival in Manipur presents an example of “reverse pilgrimage,” an alternative to conventional pilgrimage that helps contribute to religious tourism, ultimately supporting the economy. This way, it presents a diversity of religious festivities (p. 275). Finally, through the study of American women’s missionary journeys in south India, an attempt is made by author Roberta Wollons to narrate the story of converting Indian women to Christianity in the 19th century; however, her remarks that their travel should be considered a religious journey (p. 302) is dubious and seems exaggerated. This is a new interpretation of the classical notion of ‘religious journey’ (pilgrimage).

This anthology is an original contribution to the rising field of pilgrimage studies (“perigrinology”); however, considering the degree and intensity of pilgrims at the national level in India, it is puzzling why important pan-Indian sites are not represented, such as Pandharpur, Ajmer Sharif, and Tirupati-Tirumala, as well as the famed Varanasi (also known as Kashi or Banaras), and the Kumbha Mela at Prayagraj (Allahabad)—the latter one of the largest mass movements of pilgrims in the world. And, while the volume touches on a range of sacred sites, those in central India are least represented. Furthermore, some case studies, such as Ayodhya by Anand and Western Women’s missionary journeys by Wollons, seem to over-emphasise political ideology and personal inclination. Shinde’s chapter examining the emergence of a ‘religious park’ to accommodate touristic demand in the landscape is an example of innovative and contemporary concern in the emerging field; still, it could have benefitted from more rigorous scientific analysis. But in raising several alternative frameworks and theories that the following generation of scholars can take as a challenge

and critical appraisal for the interdisciplinary field, the volume will serve as a platform to study pilgrimages for disciplines like geography, landscape architecture, sociology, and religious studies.

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