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Alokparna Das

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, alokparnad@gmail.com

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The Politics of Pilgrimage Through the Prism of Mass Media

Alokparna Das

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi
alokparnad@gmail.com

Pilgrimage involves the movement of people either as individuals or as groups in search of what can be described as the sacred. Since pilgrimage is an integral part of Indian culture and has significant participation, pilgrimage sites and centres are being used by political and corporate organisations to communicate specific messages. The political relevance of religion in our contemporary world cannot be disputed, particularly in the context of a growing consumerist culture and the divisive tactics of most political organisations. In such a scenario, pilgrimage traditions and centres are periodically taken over by political groups. As a particular pilgrimage tradition evolves, sacred sites become formalised into organised socio-political systems with economic overtones.

Pilgrimage sites and traditions, both old and new, are promoted through various tools of the mass media, including newspaper articles, television and radio programmes, cinema, tourism literature or advertising campaigns created by private entities as well as government agencies. Looking through the prism of mass media, this paper analyses the new dimensions of pilgrimage that are being created; whether the focus is shifting from the sacred to the secular and then to the social; and how the issues of community and gender are being expressed through pilgrimage-related communication. My perspective is that of a mass media professional who is also an ordinary pilgrim and a solo woman traveller. The paper is not based on strict academic research, but rather on personal encounters and journalistic observations.

Key Words : pilgrimage, pilgrim, politics, advertisement, consumer culture, nation, gender, mass media

Introduction

Traditionally, pilgrimage is a physical as well as a conceptual space for the articulation of the religious and the spiritual. It involves the movement of people either as individuals or as groups in search of what can be described as the sacred. By their movement, pilgrims create personal and universal maps of ritual spaces. Pilgrims also create an integrated whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The symbolic power of the pilgrimage landscape may not only transform the individual, but is also expected to transport the pilgrim onto higher realms. In that sense, pilgrimage involves complex rituals that simultaneously embrace continuity and change as well as order and chaos. It is also a major force of social integration.

Pilgrimage has been part of Indian culture since time immemorial. Scriptures of all Indian religions glorify acts of pilgrimage. And as pilgrimage traditions evolve, sacred sites turn into organised systems with political and economic overtones. Although often considered as marginal, pilgrimage is one of the most widespread forms of tourism, generating employment and revenue.

Religious tourism focuses on the visit to religious sites in order to consolidate a particular faith, and these places attract visitors not only for religious reasons but also for their historical significance and artistic value. In fact, most religious monuments attract visitors who may not have a religious affiliation. Today, the behaviour of pilgrims is often indistinguishable from that of tourists. Hence, modern pilgrimage is not necessarily motivated by religion. In keeping with this, communication pertaining to pilgrimage is no longer restricted to religious themes. A case in point is the Government of India's *Incredible India* advertising campaigns that have shifted from showcasing temples and yogic poses to the *Atithi devo bhava* (the guest is equivalent to God) promotion highlighting service, safety and sanitation.

Pilgrimage also holds immense potential for the promotion of interfaith and intercultural communications as well as preserving cultural diversity.

During the past two-and-a-half decades, the political scenario in India has undergone a sharp transformation. This has been running parallel with the process of

globalisation. Further, the rise of religious nationalism has run parallel with the change in different facets of culture. In such a scenario, the word *yatra*, once used to describe a far away journey to a holy site, acquired political connotations in the 1990s due to the widespread media coverage of the *rathayatra*^[1] led by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) patriarch LK Advani and the many *padyaatras*^[2] of Congress leader and former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Media's Reaction to Pilgrimage-related Issues

The high cost of tickets for a few seconds of *darshan*,^[3] alleged rape and murder at places of religious congregation like *ashrams* (hermitages) and *deras*,^[4] corporate leaders and superstars with political clout getting special privileges at temples even as thousands queue up outside in hostile weather, are all time and again discussed in the mainstream media. The politics of identity, gender, caste, class and cult, which are integral to pilgrimage, get media attention too, but only if it is newsworthy. Natural disasters and / or tragedies during a pilgrimage are featured in headlines, and rightly so. In fact, tragedy, terror and tourism are perhaps the three points that figure in any news reporting on pilgrimage. Thus, when Intelligence Department input says that the Ardh Kumbh Mela at Hardwar is under the radar for terrorism reasons, or when a storm hits makeshift tents at the Simhastha Kumbh Mela in Ujjain, the news gets a banner headline or a front page display across the media.

As a journalist, I have often found that pilgrimage-centric stories focus attention on whatever is illegal in terms of funding and conduct and, in the process, mostly ignore the human stories. While the alleged irregularities in Mumbai's famous Siddhivinayak temple and involvement of local politicians hogged headlines, the plight of the family of the original owners of the shrine, their legal battle and fight for survival largely went unreported or unpublished. While

1. Literally, the journey (*yatra*) of a chariot (*rath*), in this case political-religious marches were organised by BJP.
2. A journey by foot undertaken by social reformer(s) or politician(s) and / or prominent citizen(s) to interact more closely with different sections of society and galvanise supporters.
3. An opportunity or occasion of seeing the image or statue of a deity.
4. Literally meaning camp, *deras* have a special place in Sikhism. These are religious retreats headed by a particular preacher.

the gender battle at Kerala's Sabarimala shrine has been a hot topic across television studios every Makar Sankranti, many in the national media are unaware of shrines in the same state that are meant exclusively for women or where the priest is a woman.

In India, religious tourism plays a vital role in narrowing economic imbalance. There are instances where rural areas without any business opportunities survive only due to religious tourism. For instance, Sulli Karadu near Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu is well known for a deity who is worshipped by offering camphor in huge quantities. Pilgrims from across the southern part of the country stand in long queues to offer camphor to the deity. This provides a livelihood for the local camphor sellers. Media reports by national newspapers and TV channels have often interpreted this exercise as one being orchestrated by camphor manufacturers to sell their products, and has been banned by the Tamil Nadu Endowment Board quoting environmental reasons. However, banning the sale of camphor in Sulli Karadu means a loss of income for local villagers. Unfortunately, the mainstream media has so far chosen to ignore the issue concerning local employment generation.

So, is the media's coverage objective or biased? Perhaps it is both. For example, the media's coverage of the havoc caused by the 2013 cloud burst during the Char Dham Yatra in Uttarakhand largely concentrated on two aspects. 1. The plight of pilgrims and the government's inability to provide adequate relief. 2. The relationship between environment and commercial development causing natural disasters. English news channels and newspapers termed the disaster 'man-made', caused by the harnessing of rivers through hydropower projects. The lack of preparedness by the state government was attributed to the negligence of corrupt politicians, especially with respect to illegal mining and construction. Such an analysis, though correct to a large extent, led to some omissions.

In 2013, there were an estimated 25 million pilgrims on the *Char Dham* (four pilgrimage sites) route, a figure that is more than two times the population of Uttarakhand (10,086,292). Infrastructural support for these pilgrims is closely linked to industrial development of the state. And rapid industrialisation has been fuelled by a policy that promises cheap power, easy methods of land acquisition and a tax holiday for corporates. Further, illegal mining is rampant in the region. These activities have enjoyed political protection despite repeated warnings by environmentalists. It is, therefore, not surprising that

Figure 1 : One of the Advertisements Announcing Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Grand 2016 Event



political forces are more concerned about ensuring the pilgrims' safety rather than reviewing a disastrous developmental strategy. The pilgrimage-related economy is important for the state, no doubt. In 2010, the BJP had urged the then Congress-led central government to allot 250 MW of power for the *Char Dham* pilgrimage. Later, the then Congress chief minister, VK Bahuguna, stopped the declaration of eco-sensitive zones, claiming that it would adversely impact employment opportunities. Clearly, media was right in highlighting the vested political interests. Yet, the fact remains that local concerns were swept under the carpet. The tragedy of the local people, particularly farmers at the receiving end of a discriminatory land acquisition process, and the plight of poorer residents of remote areas who are dependent on the pilgrimage economy failed to find a voice in the media, which instead, focused on the plight of the stranded pilgrims - playing into the hands of a political class that wanted the focus to be shifted from the people of the state. In fact, the focus on stranded pilgrims enabled the right-wing forces to consolidate their political constituency.

At the other end of the media spectrum are magazines and television shows that give information pertaining to various pilgrimage sites, known and lesser known, packaged with nuggets on myth, rituals, history and art. A weekly magazine, *Saptahit Bartaman*, puts Kamakhya^[5] in Assam on its cover during the *Durga Puja* festival. An *Anand Bazar Patrika* Sunday supplement puts Kurukshetra^[6] in Haryana on the cover ahead of the *Gita Jayanti* festival in December. Both are Bengali newspapers and the aim is to help Bengali readers plan their *Durga puja* (autumn) and Christmas (winter) holidays. In fact, all West Bengal educational and other establishments close for a short break during these two religious festivals.

Journey with Multiple Meanings

There was a constant focus on religiosity in the social space of India from the mid-1970s, and this was reflected in popular films. The widespread success of mythological films churned out in Bollywood, as the Hindi film industry is known, led to cinema halls witnessing congregations that normally gather in temples. The release of the movie *Jai Santoshi Ma* created huge religious fervour; it was a super hit, so was the movie *Shirdi ke Sai Baba*. Through films like these, the agents of mass media created contemporary folklore and a number of people travelled to Shirdi and other religious places or temples after watching these films.

In the last 15 years or so, new age gurus have become part of the social scene as the 'nerve soothers' for the upper middle class. Television channels like Aastha and Sanskar have propagated a particular version of religion through these preachers.

Gurus and heads of religious institutions also organise large-scale events that are attended by politicians and heads of corporate houses. In March 2016, full page advertisement were published in almost all newspapers announcing new age guru and 'Art of Living' chief Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's cultural extravaganza that promised to be a spectacle rather than anything to do with spiritual solitude (see Figure 1). One advertisement showed him literally at the centre of two power centres, the President and the Prime Minister, who were supposed to grace the occasion.

The buzz around the programme, the direct telecast by several news and religious channels and the controversy regarding the event leading to environmental hazards and pollution remained a topic of discussions and editorial content across various media for several months. This is a clear example of how important religious congregations are in media discourse on politics and culture.

This is not limited to the news media; it encompasses the entertainment industry as well. In popular television-serials across languages, the 'good' woman

5. The shrine is dedicated to the Mother Goddess and is one of the Shaktipeethas or 'sites of divine feminine energy'. It is located in the north-eastern state of Assam and is also an important place of Tantric worship.
6. A town in the northern state of Haryana, it is the site of the mythical epic battle of the Mahabharata and the place where Lord Krishna is believed to have given his message of Gita, a holy text of the Hindus.

is projected as religious, regularly undertaking a tough pilgrimage for her husband and family. Television is also prompting some changes in religious images and symbols. In Pushkar, a popular pilgrimage site in Rajasthan, for instance, the local administration has changed the name of a street in keeping with that mentioned in a popular serial, *Diya aur bati hum*, whose protagonists are shown as residents of the town. It's almost like creating a new pilgrimage route within the existing one.

There are also some concerns regarding the non-inclusive nature of certain popular shows. Programmes such as *Dharm* and *Yatra* have been adding to the popularity of their respective channels. Both programmes primarily cover Hindu sacred sites and rituals, despite the first being a show on a news channel, Aaj Tak, and the second is telecasted by an entertainment channel, Star Plus. The fact that these programmes do not delve into the pilgrimages of minority communities is certainly not in keeping with the highest ideals of mass media in a democratic and secular country.

Power, Region and Caste in Pilgrimage News

Pilgrimage is a symbol of power and a tool for mobilisation. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr BR Ambedkar used *yatra* to mobilise Indians during the struggle for Independence. In the 1980s, Congress politicians Rajiv Gandhi and Sunil Dutt undertook *padayatras* to connect with voters. Politically speaking, in India over the past 25 years we have witnessed pilgrimage becoming integral to ideas of nation and identity. The Ramjanmabhoomi movement is a case study. The word *yatra* got a new meaning when it was used by LK Advani to revive the BJP along communal lines. In the last Lok Sabha elections, when Narendra Modi, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, chose Varanasi, one of the oldest sacred cities of the world, as his constituency, it only added strength to the political connotation of *yatra*.

The political relevance of religion in our contemporary world cannot be disputed. In the aftermath of the suicide of a research scholar in Hyderabad and in order to woo around 250 million Dalits ahead of assembly polls across five states in the first half of 2016, both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal visited the birthplace of Sant Ravidass on his birthday. Ravidass is the patron saint of a large section of Dalits. Media coverage of these

visits rightly exposed the politics behind these pilgrimages.

Elected governments have promoted pilgrimage and announced subsidies in keeping with their political agenda. The major pilgrimage destinations receiving assistance include *Kailash Mansarovar Yatra* and Hajj. According to a news report published by *The Sunday Standard* on January 18, 2015, the government spent INR 6.91 billion as a Hajj subsidy in 2013-14 and INR 8.36 billion in 2012-13. The Supreme Court in 2012 had directed the government to gradually abolish the Hajj subsidy over a period of 10 years. The Hajj subsidy was started in 1993 by the then Congress government. Successive governments continued it, arguing that Muslims were among the poorest members of society. It is another story that subsidies have never been able to appease any community. In fact, the subsidy has never been for a minority community but for the cash-strapped Air India as the pilgrims could travel only through the state carrier.

Pilgrimage also figures prominently in the politics concerning the government's foreign affairs. If PM Modi scored a point by taking the visiting Japanese PM Shinzo Abe for a Ganga *aarati* at Varanasi, the Samajvadi Party-led Uttar Pradesh government had its Dalit voters in mind while issuing an advertisement to welcome the visiting Japanese Premier to the 'Land of Buddha'.

Regionalism is another feature in the political use of pilgrimage. The state governments' print and radio advertisements for the recent Ardh Kumbh Mela in Uttarakhand's Hardwar and the Simhastha Kumbh Mela in Madhya Pradesh's Ujjain have been in Hindi. (see Figure 2) The Kumbh Mela is perceived as an experience of pan Indian relevance. However, the government seems to be addressing only the Hindi speaking pilgrims through these print and audio-visual ads.

Further, the central government's ambitious INR 5 billion 'National Mission on Pilgrimage' proposes to link Krishna temples of the north-eastern states with those located in the Hindi heartland. Apparently, the proposal aims at bringing the seemingly distant Northeast closer to the mainstream. However, this integration of pilgrimages seems somewhat forced, as each region has its distinct traditions. Enforced assimilation, with politics in mind, may not actually yield the desired results for the government, as some panellists have warned on national television debates.

Figure 2 : Government Advertisement in Hindi Announcing Simhastha Kumbh Mela Dates



The Uttar Pradesh government has its own formula for communal harmony through pilgrimage. It has chalked out a plan to take a group of Hindus and Muslims on a joint pilgrimage to Pushkar and Ajmer in Rajasthan. The UP government has been marketing the initiative as a first-of-its kind step. This, too, betrays a lack of foresight. After all, the twin cities of Ajmer and Pushkar have always been a composite sacred site. While Hindus visit the Ajmer *dargah*, Muslims take part in the *mela*. In its enthusiasm to promote sponsored pilgrimage as a step towards communal harmony, the state government is hinting at a divide that never existed in reality.

A look at the various state government advertisements shows each one is trying to outdo the other in 'pilgrimage politics'. This year, the Delhi government tried to turn public places such as the Central Park in Connaught Place into a space for pilgrims to congregate by organising Saraswati Puja, Gurbani Samagam and Sufi concerts where the ministers of the ruling Aam Aadmi Party were members of the audience. Advertisements inviting people to join the gathering dotted the entire city. The Rajasthan government, on the other hand, advertised the Chandrabhaga Mela, a lesser known pilgrimage.

Though a welcome step that may lead to an increased footfall at the exquisitely carved but not so well known Sun temple that is at the centre of this pilgrimage, the media hasn't missed pointing out that it takes place in the constituency of the state Chief Minister, Vasundhara Raje.

It is political mileage that they are looking at when Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal does a Yamuna *aarati* to start a drive to clean the river or when the Haryana government hails its first year in office by celebrating Gita Jayanti not just in Kurukshetra but also across all districts of the state. It is common for local politicians across parties to wish people of their constituency or visit *puja pandals*^[7] during *Durga Puja*. In fact, last year *puja pandals* provided a perfect platform to Bihar politicians ahead of the assembly polls, and all these activities were promoted through advertisements issued by various governments and political parties.

Apart from government-sponsored programmes, pilgrimage is also a tool for politics during the annual *kanwaryatra*.^[8] Saffron-clad pilgrims walk to the banks

7. A temporary structure set up to venerate the goddess Durga during Durga Puja, known as puja pandal

of Ganga during the month of Shravan (July-August), clogging all roads in north India, and this has become a sign of Hindutva mobilisation. This *yatra* started gaining popularity in the 1990s. At the time of the *yatra*, camps spring up along the major routes to provide meals, beds and toilet facilities to the pilgrims, known as *kanwariyas*. Originally, the *yatra* was all about sacrifice. Now *kanwariyas* are provided with knee caps. There are 'Express Kanwars' where you can complete the journey on a bike. They are allowed to completely dominate the roads. Some political analysts in the media view the rise of the *kanwariya* and their show of strength as part of the ascendance of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. Most *kanwariyas* belong to the lower middle class. For them, this trip is like a release; there is also a sense of heroism, adventure and aggressiveness associated with this *yatra*.

Pilgrimage is a political vehicle in Jammu and Kashmir too, where tragedies, attacks and controversies have marred the Amarnath Yatra. Once a symbol of Hindu-Muslim bond, it is now at the centre of political debates on distrust and mishandling of situations such as land transfers and the melting of the naturally formed ice *lingam*.^[9]

The Amarnath pilgrimage is a fairly recent affair, following the discovery of the cave by a Muslim shepherd in the 1850s, whose descendants, together with Hindu *sadhus*, were involved in organising the pilgrimage until 2001. From all accounts, the pilgrimage ran more or less smoothly for 150 years, even at the height of the militancy, until politicians stepped in. Ever since the government took over, the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board has been mired in controversy and the *yatra* seems to have taken a wrong turn.

In 2004, the J&K Governor extended the pilgrimage from one to two months; a second 30-km shorter route, via Baltal, was regularised. Various new facilities, including a helicopter service, were advertised, increasing traffic from a few thousand to four hundred

8. The annual pilgrimage of the devotees of Lord Shiva, it is primarily a north Indian ritual wherein men walk to the banks of river Ganga. The pilgrims, called *Kanwariyas* (because they carry *kanwar* or bamboo poles), bring back holy water and pour it on Shiva *lingams*.
9. The cylindrical phallic symbol of Lord Shiva. The god is mostly worshipped in this form. The *lingam* is a symbol of generative power that is without a beginning and with no end. The *lingam* rests on a disc-shaped *yoni* that represents Shakti or creative power.

thousand (400,000) pilgrims. The State Pollution Control Board complained about the quantity of garbage and human waste. In 2006, the *mahant* involved in organising the *yatra* resigned, accusing the Governor of creating an artificial ice *lingam*. The natural *lingam* had begun to melt earlier than normal due to heat and increased pilgrim traffic.

With reference to the Amarnath Yatra, James Preston (1992) argues that one of the main reasons for its spiritual magnetism is the difficulty of access to the shrine, while Gautam Navlakha (2008) demonstrates how the site gained importance due to its promotion by the Indian state for specific political reasons. Controversies and disputes surrounding the Amarnath Yatra are cases of pilgrimage traditions losing their spontaneity when taken over by political authorities.

Memorials as New Pilgrimages

The politics of pilgrimage also encompasses *samadhis* and memorials, and here, too, attempt is made to add a religious colour. In recent years, we have witnessed religious leader and exponent of *Ramcharitmanas* Morari Bapu recite 'Manas Rajghat Katha' on Mahatma's Gandhi's birthday and death anniversary at Delhi and Porbandar. Simultaneously, media reports have highlighted the pitiable conditions of memorials dedicated to former Presidents APJ Abdul Kalam and Neelam Sanjiva Reddy. One can only hope that the online travel portal Stayzilla's advertisement of a 'pilgrimage' tour of Rameswaram, following the footsteps of Kalam, would bring more tourists to the temple town and also draw government attention to India's Missile Man's grave that needs protection and preservation.

Years ago, to celebrate the 100th birthday of revolutionary freedom fighter Bhagat Singh and to write about places associated with him, I had undertaken a pilgrimage through the bazaars, lanes and villages of Punjab to his final resting place at Ferozepur. During the course of the travel, I met a Bengali family who, for the last three generations has been taking care of the Jallianwalla Bagh, a site of massacre during British rule. The Mukherjees, to me, were the priests of one of the most sacred sites of our freedom struggle. We need many more such families to dedicate themselves in preserving legacies and pilgrimage traditions that are of importance to all Indians, irrespective of religious affiliations.

Talking of national pilgrimages, many people decried the Fevikwik '*Todo Nahin, Jodo*' (don't break, but

bond) advertisement campaign on India and Pakistan beating the retreat event at Wagah-Attari border as being disrespectful to the nation's collective memory of the Partition. However, the young and upwardly mobile Indian consumers seem to find the advertisement humorous.

Figure 3 : A Still from the Fevikwik 'Todo Nahin, Jodo' Advertising Campaign



Pilgrims in a Globalised India: Is it all About the Economy?

Globalisation, economic liberalisation, and commodification of culture have had an impact on religious sites, with pilgrimage turning into international commercial service. This is not limited to tourists buying multi-faith trip packages, instead it involves a process wherein religious heritage has been commercialised. Spiritual tourism has changed from the conventional concept of 'the harder the journey the better the reward', to a wider concept of a desire for relief from routines. Religious tourism is today a dynamic multi-billion-dollar global industry. The devout pilgrims have moved away from their earlier practice when *yatra* used to be a tough task with a tradition of even doing a *shraddha*^[10] for one's own self before embarking on a spiritual journey away from mainstream society. Now, people across faiths purchase first-class products and services to enhance their spiritual experience.

As Alexandra Mack's essay on *Pilgrimage: Sacred landscapes and self-organized complexity* puts it, the role of economy is an essential element in complex systems of pilgrimage, in which the exchange of

goods and information plays a fundamental role in integrating the overall structure. Pilgrims must be fed and housed at the pilgrimage centre, and may return home with ritual objects and souvenirs. The economic establishment is perpetuated by the return of pilgrims each year. Religious and spiritual experiences are also used to attract consumers to buy tickets to cultural programmes and even property in and around places such as Hardwar, Vrindavan and Ajmer that are considered holy cities. This process of commoditisation can be seen in advertising campaigns that use pilgrimage as a tool to market products and services.

Religious tourism is less susceptible to economic fluctuations. Apart from religious institutions, holy sites are often surrounded by facilities such as shops, travel agencies, hotels and hospitals, providing employment for the local community. The sale of religious items such as holy water, icons, etc. brings in considerable revenue for the locals. The Nizamuddin Basti Mela, organised in Delhi by the Aga Khan Trust in 2015, was an example where spiritualism and materialism joined hands for a composite experience with a Sufi pilgrimage site as the backdrop.

Some religious sites have been visited for centuries and there are others that are discovered, thanks to media initiatives, and promise to bring some dramatic changes for the local community. As a media professional I have experienced the sudden discovery of religious sites and relics and their conservation. The discovery and restoration of a Buddhist stupa in Haryana's Chaneti encouraged local residents to dream of a concrete road to their village connecting the highway, tourist arrivals from other countries, and a hike in their income. Sadly, that dream is yet to materialise. The regional media that enthusiastically reported the restoration work done by government agencies, has failed to give a voice to local aspirations. The same can be said of the discovery of a Mauryan era water tank with an iron plinth on the outskirts of Vrindavan. While the President's visit for laying the foundation stone of the world's tallest temple at Vrindavan got ample media coverage, this significant archaeological discovery was dismissed as an inside page story.

Pilgrimage sites like *ashrams* and *deras* are themselves part of the marketplace when they sell products that are not just religious in nature but also of daily use. A case in point is advertising campaigns by Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar promoting beauty and food products manufactured by their organisations.

10. Dedicated to ancestors and departed souls, these are rituals performed on the death anniversaries of family members and / or during the Pitripaksha - a fortnight dedicated to ancestors during the Hindu month(s) of Bhadrapada-Asvin (September-October).

During a recent Holi festival, a five-star hotel near Delhi's international airport issued advertisements that promised that Radisson Blu would create Lord Krishna's Braj in the heart of Delhi through a food festival. It was an attempt to create an ancient pilgrimage site in a modern, urban setting with consumerism at its core.

Advertising: Charting New Directions

Pilgrimage involves legends, and in today's consumer-centric culture, marketing and advertising campaigns are creating new messages that appeal to both the seller and the buyer. Marketing becomes the all-absorbing discourse in this regime of power, and branding is the weapon of choice (Martin, 2011).

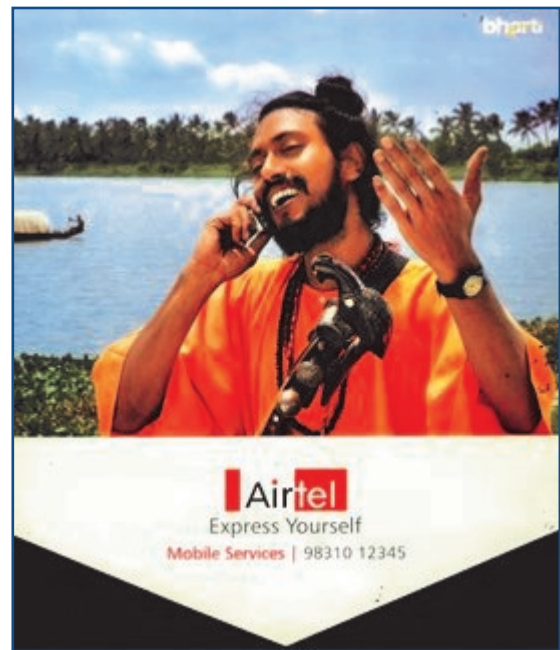
A couple of years ago, Reliance Mobile launched an advertisement that guaranteed great network clarity in pilgrim centres. Given that many pilgrimage sites are either up in the mountains or deep in the jungle, it promised to benefit a certain audience. Tata Sky has been promoting its Activ Darshan and Devotion brands of late. *Sadhus*, *bauls*, Mathura, Banaras have been used as cultural motifs in advertisements, sometimes intelligently as in an Amazon.com one and at others irreverently, as in this 2004 Daygum example (Figure 4).

The 2010 Airtel Express Yourself advertisement (Figure 5) showing a *baul* (mendicant-musician who frequents pilgrimage sites like Gangasagar in West Bengal) won two awards for the company.

Figure 4 : A Daygum Advertisement Showing a Sadhu Buried in Sand



Figure 5 : Baul in Airtel advertisement



The famous pilgrimage site of Mathura figured in Railways advertisements of the 1960s and also in the Idea's 'Hello Hunny Bunny' advertisement of a couple of years ago (Figure 6 & Figure 7).

Communication theorist George Gerbner has defined culture as being a network of texts that 'mediate between existence and consciousness of existence, and thereby contributes to both'. Advertisements, as cultural texts, associate consumerism with how we conceive of our existence as citizens of a particular community or country (Chattopadhyay, 2014). Companies have been cashing in on popular community-centric pilgrimage traditions to further their brand presence. A case in point is the 2015 Dalda Edible Oils 'Bhajan se Bhojan' campaign during the Jagannath *Rathayatra* in Puri, one of India's largest annual festivals. A consumer connect initiative, the campaign portrayed the traditional aspect of the festival, while ensuring brand visibility in the holy land to mark the *Nabakalebara* pilgrimage. Dalda Edible Oils collaborated with sand sculptor Sudarshan Patnaik to create a branded exhibit at Puri beach, which was on display for pilgrims. Dalda Edible Oils bottles filled with raw *prasad* (food offerings) ingredients and hand fans were distributed among the pilgrim-tourists.

Talking of food, *The Times of India* and Yatra.com's Times Passion Trail has successfully organised a food tour across Braj, with Lord Krishna's love for butter and milk as their theme.

Figure 6 & Figure 7 : Mathura's Ghats in Advertisements by Railways and Idea



The digital world, too, has transformed communication patterns. Now you have *Speaking Tree*, the spiritual and wellness supplement of *The Times of India* as an app on your mobile phone, and can listen to *Soul Yatra* on an FM radio station. Despite their asceticism, sects, known as *akharas*,^[11] are moving with the times. Leaders of *akharas* taking part in the Kumbh Mela have Facebook pages. Some gurus advertise on billboards and posters to attract followers, others chat on mobile phones. There is no hotline to God as yet, though.

Brand Kumbh Mela

The Kumbh Mela, perhaps the biggest congregation of pilgrims in the world, no longer has rickety stalls selling everyday products to pilgrims. For those looking for luxury, there are air-conditioned cottages in the fair. It is also a place for companies such as construction and agricultural equipment manufacturer JCB India to peddle their wares priced at lakhs of rupees. According to Infinity Advertising Services, the official advertising firm for the 2013 Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, about 52 companies participated that year (see Figure 8). India celebrates about 25,000 rural fairs each year and companies use around one-tenth of them to expand their brand presence.

Though the Kumbh Mela has always been a big business opportunity, now companies are going an extra mile to promote their brands by using traditional entertainment and modern technology to connect with consumers, be it middle class pilgrims or the *sadhus*. In the 2013 Kumbh, mobile service provider Vodafone reached out to consumers by screening films and

providing earphones wired with in-built speakers that played devotional songs. Cosmetics company Emami set up massage kiosks for pilgrims to experience its Navratna oil brand.

‘Did you wash your hands with Lifebuoy?’ That was the message, in Hindi, stamped on over 2.5 million *rotis* at the Maha Kumbh Mela. The unusual advertising medium had pilgrims taking notice. The campaign enabled Unilever, the company that makes the soap, Lifebuoy, to reach a large audience in a low-cost but effective manner. Unilever has the advertising agency, Ogilvy, to thank for the brilliant idea. The communication won awards, including at the Cannes festival (Figure 9).

11. *Akhara* is a religious school that imparts training in traditional martial arts, yoga and scriptures. Traditional schools where *Kusti* (Indian style of wrestling) is taught are also called *akharas*. The earliest religious *akharas*, seven in number, are believed to have been set up by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century. An *akhara* is usually set up under single leadership and / or has a common lineage or sect. The members of *akharas* are expected to shun worldly life. At present, there are three major *akharas*: Juna, Niranjani and Mahanirvani and three minor *akharas* that are affiliated with major *akharas*. The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the apex body of *akharas*, comprise 14 organisations. *Akharas* have traditionally been a male domain, however, in 2014, breaking age-old tradition, around 100 women seers formed the Shri Sarveshwar Mahadeo Vaikunthdham Muktidwar Akhara or Pari Akhara at Allahabad. The move was criticised by other *akharas*, who refused to recognise the all-women *akhara*.

Figure 8 : Coca Cola's Marketing-media Campaign for 2013 Kumbh Mela Punned on 'Sangam'



According to Piyush Pandey, the man behind the campaign, the greatest success of his team in recent years has been the 'Kumbh Mela Lifebuoy Roti Reminder':

You needed to understand the cultural nuances of a broad variety of people. By the late 20th century, we needed to reach people that conventional media could not reach. That's what the 'Roti Reminder' was all about - reaching consumers differently without using conventional media,

he has written in his autobiographical work, *Pandeymonium*.

The media regularly reported from the Kumbh Mela at Hardwar in 2016 - be it the 'golden baba' with 15.5 kg of gold or Abdul Hafeez, the 69-year-old, who has been a volunteer at the Kumbh since 1967 and continues to be one even nine years after his retirement.

Brand Kumbh generates business worth crores and everyone wants a space here, a platform bigger, better and higher than others. No wonder, in 2016 *sadhus* in Hardwar were reportedly angry over the proposed allotment of land to an *akahara* of women *sanyasins*

known as *Pari Akhara*, which wasn't recognised by the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad. *Pari Akhara*, founded in 2013, threatened to go to court against the *ashrams* of male ascetics.

This brings us to the question of gender in pilgrimage – a topic of heated debates across mass media in India.

God and Gender

Can a woman be a *maulana* (Muslim religious scholar) and call the faithful at Delhi's Jama Masjid to pray? Can we have a female archbishop (in Delhi we have

Figure 9 : Roti Reminder Campaign at Kumbh Mela Which Won Several Awards



had two women leading prayers in historic churches like the Saint James Church)? Can an openly gay man be allowed to lead the *Akal Takht* (seat of power in Sikh religion)? Can a Dalit be a priest in a temple at Kanchipuram? Can a European be allowed inside the Jagannath temple in Puri? Can a women's *akhara* lead the *Shahi Snan* (royal bath) at the Kumbha Mela?

Amid all the news and editorials that raise such questions, it is heartening to read that the Golden Temple has honoured a pro-gay Canadian politician. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee's decision to honour Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne created a controversy since she supports same sex marriages which the *Akal Takht*, the highest seat of the Sikhs, opposes. However, SGPC chief secretary Harcharan Singh told the media that the step was taken keeping in mind the sizeable Sikh community in Canada and that the *Akal Takht* edict was for Sikhs and she was a Christian.

The relationship between gender and religion is a complex one. The media coverage of the Shani Shignapur shrine and Haji Ali *dargah* rows have yet again brought the gender imbalance of pilgrimages to the foreground with politicians and religious leaders having to take sides. As women activists clashed with religious practices, the media firmly stood behind women's rights and reminded readers and viewers that the Constitution was the final word on this subject. Television channels decried the arrest of women protesters and newspapers had articles by religious gurus for and against the move. For some time, the media gave prominent coverage to Trupti Desai, founder of the Bhumata brigade, and Zakia Soman, co-founder of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan. Simultaneously, debates on television news programmes exposed politicians and religious leaders who continue to practice discrimination against women in places of worship. Due to media coverage, a controversy stirred the nation's imagination - one that had women go to any length to defy a tradition that has been in existence since medieval times. The news reports did not stop after women entered the Shani Shignapur shrine; the media followed battles against similar traditions practiced in Triyambakeshwar and Mahalaxmi temples at Nashik and Kolhapur, respectively. And news magazines such as *Frontline* put this women's movement on their cover pages.

Is Sabarimala or Haji Ali or Shani Shignapur a test of women's empowerment? When asked at a spiritual music festival organised by the Kerala government early this year, Ustad Zakir Husain, the internationally

acclaimed percussionist, referred to Mahatma Gandhi's pilgrimages and said that if women wanted to visit a shrine, no one can ban them.

Talking of gender, the Vibrant Gujarat campaign by the government had an interesting advertisement on Siddhpur, the pilgrimage meant exclusively for mother's *shraddha* (offerings made to the departed soul). One wishes there was also an advertisement on the Bahucharaji temple, not very far from Siddhpur, that is dedicated to the third gender.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by mentioning a pilgrimage that has figured prominently in media discourse - Sabarimala. To me it is the symbol of what pilgrimage means to Indians. Gender discrimination has been firmly in place since time immemorial, making it unattainable for women of a certain age group. The deity, Ayyappa, is the son of two male gods, Shiva and Vishnu, and is known as Hari-Hara-Suta (Son of Hari and Hara). Sabarimala is also a temple where the deity goes to sleep listening to a Catholic singer's lullaby. As a matter of ritual, the recorded voice of K.J. Yesudas is played on the public address system every night for Ayyappa to have a good night's sleep. At the feet of the 18 steps that lead to the temple is a Muslim saint, Vavar Swami, who is also worshipped by the pilgrims. These practices of a composite culture come as a package, for the traditional method of attaining peace has always been inclusion, not exclusion. Sabarimala is an attempt to bring together various faiths - tribal, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Vedanta, Tantra and even Islam. The pilgrim cry of 'Swami saranam Ayyappa' (Lord Ayyappa, I seek refuge in you) mirrors the Buddhist chant of 'Buddham saranam gacchami' (I go to the Buddha for refuge) and is indicative of the monastic roots of this shrine. Including women of all age groups in this pilgrimage will probably be the last step towards articulation of equality before God in a spiritual quest of self discovery.

That may take some time. Until then, as media highlights political aspirations, gender identity, caste equations, environmental issues and notions of nationhood, pilgrimage would definitely find a space in all kinds of discourse with debates encompassing both the sacred and the socially relevant.

In today's world, we can perhaps take inspiration from newspaper articles and radio spots on Sri M, as Mumtaz Ali Khan is better known, who has been on a

pilgrimage to promote peace and walked for more than 400 days across 5,500 km to build bridges between communities. It is time media puts the spotlight on pilgrimages undertaken by people like him and on the people and economies impacted by the large-scale pilgrimage and tourism, and not just the political elites and corporate interests.

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