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Editorial : Pilgrimages in India: Celebrating journeys of plurality and sacredness

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This special issue of the International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage brings together a diverse range of papers from an international and interdisciplinary conference on India's sacred journeys held at the Indiana University Gateway in Gurgaon, India, on March 2-3, 2016. The conference, entitled 'Pilgrimages in India: Celebrating Journeys of Plurality and Sacredness' was sponsored by Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Indiana University - Bloomington, and the IU Alumni Association.

The conference organisers (Sonika Jain, Varada Sambhus, Vinod Verma and Ian McIntosh) sought to capture the rich diversity of pilgrimages in India and they encouraged the participation of speakers whose voices need social mobility, such as the Dalits, women,

and other marginalised sections of the Indian population.

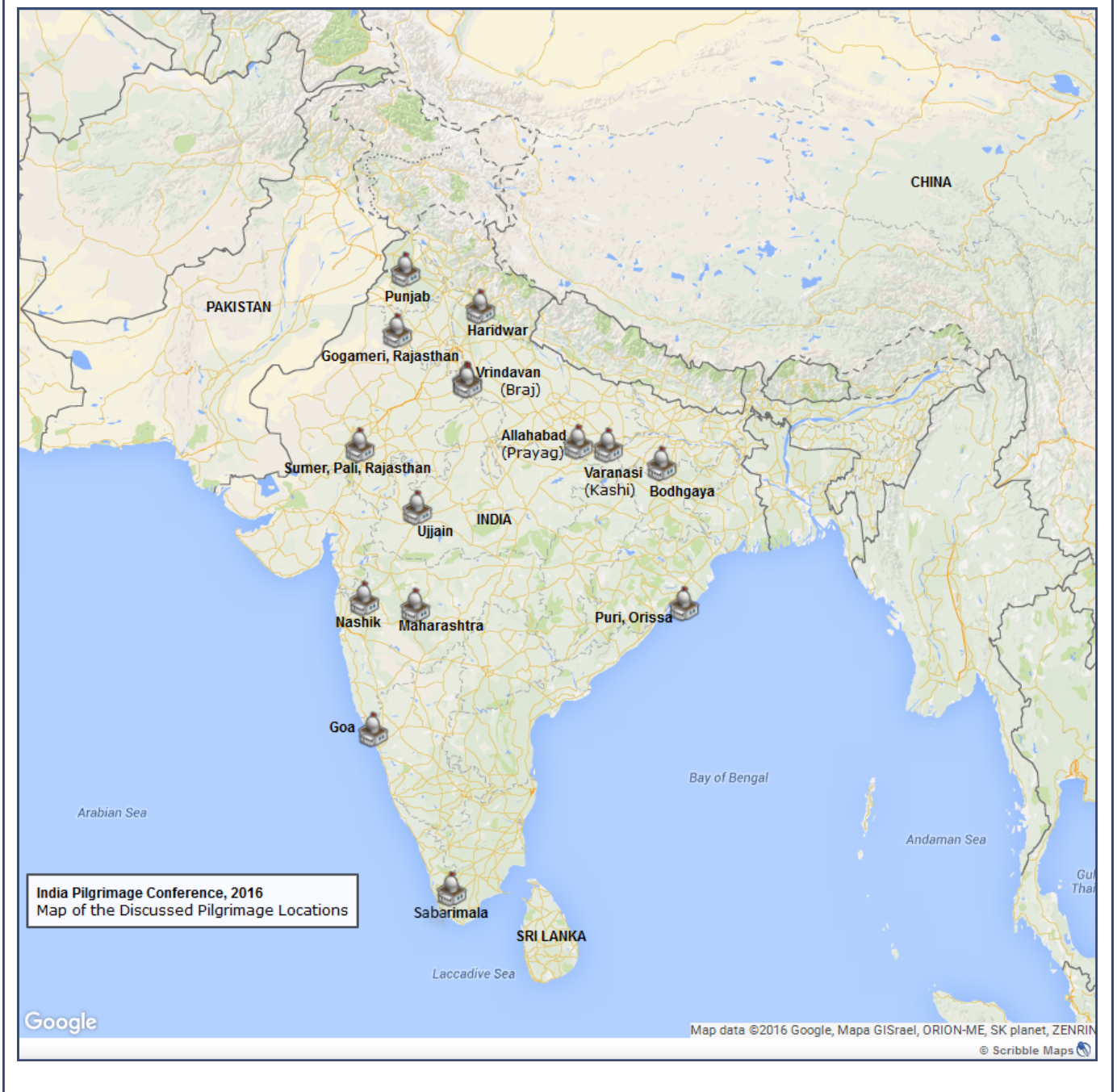
Pilgrimage scholars from across India and beyond were in attendance, and they presented on India's diverse religious faiths, including Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, Sufism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The topics of discussion were equally varied and included sacred and secular pilgrimage, pilgrimage and human rights, pilgrimage and tourism, and papers inspired by the lower caste poet Ravidas. There were also auto-ethnographical and experiential accounts, case studies, a documentary film by young Indian film-makers, and various works-in-progress. There were also two plenary presentations. Prof. David Haberman of Indiana University spoke on the topic of Mount Govardhan near Mathura, and Prof. Raj Kumar of

Conference attendees: Pilgrimages in India: Celebrating Journeys of Plurality and Sacredness



Indiana University Gateway in Gurgaon, India, March 2-3, 2016

Map of Pilgrimage Locations Discussed in the India Pilgrimage Conference, 2016



Delhi University discussed ‘Travelling through Caste’. There was also a performance by the gifted musician, Ustad Kamal Sabri, and an exhibition on sacred Indian architecture held in conjunction with the American Institute for Indian Studies. Indian national television ‘Doordarshan’ interviewed all of the 24 presenters during the conference and also documented two of the presentations.

This issue of the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* presents a selection of the papers from the conference.

Pilgrimage scholars Rana P.B. Singh & Pravin S. Rana present their research on Kashi (Varanasi), the spiritual capital of India and the most sacred city of Hinduism. Kashi’s cosmic layout is explored, including the five pilgrimage circuits that symbolise the five heavenly elements of Hindu cosmogony. Ankur Goswami then discusses Prayag (Allahabad), another holy city, and the site of the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage which is held every 12 years. He investigates the intersection of knowledge and place and how it impacts the practice of pilgrimage. Ujaan Ghosh discusses the Jagannath temple, also one of the most popular pilgrimage

Saranggi maestro Ustad Kamal Sabri (center, rear,) after his memorable musical performance, with conference attendees



destinations in India. He demonstrates how this site of pilgrimage became a pivotal anchor surrounding which a convoluted narrative of colonial politics played out.

The discussion then turns to the pilgrimage of a folk deity by Rajshree Dhali, whose paper provides a glimpse into the significance of the deity and the co-existence of Hindu and Islamic traditions. Swati Goel presents her research on the political significance of 16th and 17th century pilgrimage through her paper on 'Political and merchant devotees – Multiple facets of pilgrimage to the medieval region of Braj'. This discussion is continued by Alokparna Das, who addresses the current state of the politics of pilgrimage through the prism of mass media.

Any survey of Indian pilgrimage is incomplete without a reference to the interplay of caste and religion. Raj Kumar introduces the reader to the caste system in

India as seen through the lens of Indian pilgrimages and associated narratives. Anna Bochkovskaya enriches the discussion with her paper on Ravidas, a leading poet, philosopher and preacher, who belonged to the lower castes. She presents the pilgrimage tradition established by the followers of Ravidas in her paper 'Begumpura Yatras: Constructing Ravidassia Pilgrimage Tradition'. Adding to the diversity of the discussion, Sonika Jain presents a personal account of a secular pilgrimage with her paper on 'Running: An Inclusive Approach to Understanding the Notion of Pilgrimages'. Finally, Ian McIntosh provides an analysis of the sacred journeys and associated mythology connected with Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang and Indian Zen Master Bodhidharma, arguably the most influential peace-builders ever to set foot in each other's countries.