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Being Together at the Magh Mela: The Social Psychology of Crowds and Collectivity

Nick Hopkins, Clifford Stevenson, Shail Shankar, Kavita Pandey, Sammyh Khan and Shruti Tewari

Introduction

In 2013, readers of the *Financial Times Weekend Magazine* would have come across an article describing the Kumbh Mela at *Prayag*, Allahabad. The piece conveyed the scale of this north Indian Hindu pilgrimage event and its spiritual significance. It also conveyed something of the psychological experience of participation: The author – a western expert on yoga – described how, surrounded by the flow of holy men sweeping down to the Ganges, he had ‘never felt so much at one with a crowd. With everyone stripped down to their loincloths, a sense of individual identity fell away and we surrendered ourselves to the common purpose’ (Mallinson, 2013: 25).

Accompanied by photographs of bearded sadhus and descriptions of naked ash-smearing holy men, the author’s account of his experience of being subsumed into the mass, is truly fascinating and immediately evokes Turner’s concept of *communitas* (Turner, 1973). Indeed, it is hard to imagine how readers of such a piece could fail to be struck by the contrast between the intense emotional experience of this colourful collective event and the altogether greyer reality of a mundane British weekend. If ever an event was exotic, mystical, and removed from everyday life, surely this – the Kumbh Mela – is it.

However, such contrasts can be misleading, implying that our theories of everyday life have no applicability to such events. Furthermore, they can encourage the belief that whatever happens in such mysterious and mystical events is marginal to everyday life. Yet, we will argue otherwise: In what follows we consider how analyses of everyday social psychological processes can shed light on

the dynamics structuring participants' experiences in the Mela, and how such experiences may have longer-term consequences.

Hindu Pilgrimage in India

Pilgrimage is important in Hinduism. The *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* refer to *tirthas* (literally, fords or crossing points in water) as holy places where one can catch sight of the deities. They also talk of '*tirthas* of the heart' 'implying that the pilgrim should not only bathe in the waters of earthly *tirthas*, but also in the inner virtues of truth, charity, patience and self-control' (Coleman and Elsner, 1995: 149). For some this state is achieved by adopting the ascetic existence of the renunciant. Yet for most, the renunciation of everyday comfort is more temporarily achieved in and through pilgrimage.

There are many holy sites in India (Bhardwaj, 1973), and Singh (2011) cites evidence that of all the domestic travel in India, over a third is related to pilgrimage. The significance of such flows is hard to overestimate. They have important economic and environmental dimensions (Bleie, 2003), and in the recent past have been given a distinctive political dimension through being used to mark out 'Hindu' territory and advance an ethnic definition of the Indian nation (Jaffrelot, 2009; Singh, 2011). They also have important social psychological dimensions, and across disciplines there is increasing interest in the 'inner experience' of pilgrimage (Collins-Kreiner, 2010).

The Prayag Melas

The Kumbh Mela at Allahabad is the most famous Hindu pilgrimage (for its history, see Maclean, 2008; for a contemporary description, see Tully, Lannoy and Mahendra, 2002). Occurring every twelve years, it is attended by millions from across north India. Yet, although it attracts particular attention, this event is but a special incarnation of an equally remarkable annual gathering that takes place in the month of *Magh* (January/February). Each year, for one lunar cycle, a vast tented city grows up on the sandy floodplain at the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers (*Prayag*, Allahabad). From nothing, roads appear, pontoon bridges are secured over the Ganges, residential camps are marked out, the more celebrated religious organisations pitch huge marquees, and pilgrims arrive (some by bus and train, some by tractor-towed trailers) from across north India (especially Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar). Some pilgrimage sites are remote and the journeys they require take one into sites of natural beauty. Yet, although the Prayag Melas take place just outside the

city of Allahabad, many of the distinctive features of pilgrimage are to be found: travel, hardship and people in abundance.

All sorts of people can be found at the Mela. There are the ‘day-bathers’ who do not stay in the Mela but who visit, especially on the more auspicious days of the lunar calendar, to bathe in the Ganges. There are beggars and those who service the Mela, sweeping the roads, removing rubbish, cleaning latrines, and undertaking a myriad of other tasks. There are barbers, shopkeepers, police officers, and NGOs promoting their messages. Many of those who visit for just a few days will combine their bathing in the Ganges with a visit to a local temple and then proceed to the markets and funfair that link the site to the city.

However, at the event’s heart are those who commit to live at the site for the entire month. For these, the markets and funfair are to-be-avoided distractions, and their daily routine involves movement between the camps in which they live, the tents associated with their gurus and sadhus, and their bathing ghats. These pilgrims are mostly rural and elderly – predominantly in their 60s and 70s (Tewari *et al.*, 2012) – and they seek religious merit by renouncing all worldly ways and comforts in order to live a spiritual existence. Moreover, they do not only commit to live a simple life for the month – they commit to attending for 12 consecutive years. Such pilgrims are known as ‘Kalpwasis’ and according to some accounts this name gives insight into their purpose – *kalpa* denotes the transformation of the self through inner resolve, and *vas* denotes the living out of this resolve.

It is understandable that journalists should be drawn to the more spectacular displays of faith and spirituality apparent at the Prayag Melas: the sights of sadhus in colourful robes or of naked and ash-smearing renunciants are indeed dramatic. However, an exclusive focus on such figures obscures other equally remarkable characters: the ordinary men and women who undertake Kalpwas. A Kalpwasi’s life is hardly spectacular. They do not wear the bright robes of the sadhus nor the ash of the renunciants. Rather, they adhere to a simple routine. They live in canvas tents, sleep on straw, eat one meal a day which is made up of bland foods, eschewing anything spicy which might excite the body to the detriment of the spirit or dull the mind (so-called ‘*tamasic*’ foods). Their days start early – well before dawn they rise to perform their *puja* before walking to the Ganges for the most important part

of their rituals – bathing in the sacred river. On returning to their camps, they devote themselves to the mundane tasks of camp life: fetching water from the standpipes, preparing the midday meal, buying wood or dung for the stoves on which the meal will be cooked, talking with their neighbours. Much of their remaining time is spent on reading holy texts or attending afternoon meetings held in tented venues across the site. Many venues are small – with room for just a few dozen to sit on the floor – but others accommodate several hundred. Some venues host performances of scenes from the holy scriptures and the singing of religious songs. Others host sadhus (typically men) delivering injunctions on religious duties and obligations. Still others host meetings on social issues (for example, the pollution of India’s holy rivers).

Camping for a month is hard enough. However, doing so in winter is particularly tough – especially as Kalpwasis must bathe before dawn when the January temperatures before sunrise are not much above freezing. Moreover, the environment is anything but tranquil. The site is peppered with loudspeakers. Some belong to the Mela authorities, others to religious organisations, and such is the multiplicity of competing broadcasts that one is often surrounded by an undecipherable cacophony. Moreover, it is crowded, with limited opportunities for quiet solitude. Indeed, in his account of the Kumbh, Mark Tully draws something of a contrast between the still of the natural world and the busyness of the social world of the Mela. Referring to a scene at the water’s edge he describes how ‘night herons stood silent and still, oblivious of the cacophony and the crowds, their heads jutting forward, waiting to pounce on their prey’ (Tully *et al.*, 2002: 58).

Yet, despite all this – the basic conditions, the cold, the noise, the crowding – the Kalpwasis we interviewed described their experiences in overwhelmingly positive terms and as involving a sense of serene bliss (Cassidy *et al.*, 2007; Prayag Magh Mela Research Group (PMMRG), 2007; Shankar *et al.*, 2013). It might be thought that this says more about life in India in general than about life in the Mela itself. Perhaps the harshness of the Mela is not so different from routine village life? Perhaps the noise and the cold are unnoticed? Perhaps people in more ‘collectivistic’ cultures (such as India) experience others’ physical proximity differently from those in more individualistic societies? Yet our ethnographic observation of Kalpwasis in their villages and in the Mela shows that the two environments do indeed differ, and that life at the Mela is difficult. Moreover, we know that the cold

and the noise are prominent features of their experience (Shankar *et al.*, 2013; Pandey *et al.*, in press). We also know that people in India can experience crowding as aversive (Nagar and Pandey, 1987).

Yet, still the experience is described in extremely positive terms, and as we will see, this positivity extends to a sense of well-being that lingers even after their return home. What then can social psychology say about this experience and what can it say about the processes involved?

The Experience of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage sites can be experienced as ‘spaces of renewal’ (Maddrell and della Dora, 2013a). For example, the spiritual experience of visiting Ireland’s holy wells is shaped by the calm and stillness of these sites (Foley, 2013), the rhythm of movement, and the fact that such embodied practices are performed alongside others (Maddrell and della Dora, 2013b). Yet, whilst the quiet and remoteness of a place may invite spiritual calm, at other sites the scale and clamour of the crowds may be particularly important, and as social psychologists we are particularly interested in the collective dimension to the experience of pilgrimage.

The pleasures of participating in collective events have long puzzled observers (Ehrenreich, 2007). Indeed, such is this puzzlement that many analysts have characterised the passion of the collective as indicating an aberrant departure from everyday ‘normality’. Certainly, psychological theories have tended to couple emotion and crowd psychology together, and to set them apart from reason and individual psychology. This is clearly apparent in the work of the founding figure of crowd psychology – Gustav Le Bon (1841–1931) – who argued that crowds were characterised by a heightened emotionality and irrationality that could be contrasted from the reason and self-control people exhibit when alone. Indeed, for Le Bon, people in crowds have lost their identity and their capacity for reason such that all that remained were the passions (Le Bon, 1895). Following Le Bon’s lead much social psychological theory assumed that participation in mass events entailed the distortion of normal functioning with the consequence that for years, crowds were, as Reicher (2011) puts it, ‘the elephant man of the social sciences’ (Reicher, 2011: 434).

Outside of psychology, Le Bon’s contemporary, Durkheim (1858–1917) offered an analysis in which ‘effervescent’ assembly was understood in more positive terms – as revivifying social bonds and recharging the collective representations on which everyday social life is based. Durkheim also

believed that emotion could overwhelm crowd members, but rejected the idea that people lost their identities in the mass or that the emotions expressed in the mass reflected such losses. As Olaveson (2001) explains, Durkheim's effervescence is 'characterised by intimacy, intensity, and immediacy, yet it also involves will and intention, and symbolic focus', and should not be seen as 'simply mob psychology or camaraderie' (Olaveson, 2001: 101). Moreover, Durkheim argued that the pleasure of the mass arose in part at least from the feeling that people were able to transcend everyday concerns and to enact their shared ideas and values. That is, although in everyday life 'the mind is chiefly preoccupied with utilitarian and individualistic affairs' (Durkheim, 1912 [1995]: 352; cited in Olaveson, 2001: 110), people in the crowd could rise above such concerns. Durkheim also underlined the importance of the sense of collectivity experienced at the event: he argued that for excitement to occur, a gathering 'must possess a degree of unity, of intimacy and the forces which it releases must be sufficiently intense to take the individual outside himself and to raise him to a superior life' (1913, cited in Olaveson, 2001: 101).

Undoubtedly, Durkheim's approach helps re-habilitate collective events as topics of social enquiry and relevant for everyday life. However, the social scientific theorisation of the psychological processes underlying people's experience of collective participation has been hesitant. For example, Victor Turner's analysis of pilgrimage, although sharing much in common with Durkheim's approach (Olaveson, 2001), presumes that pilgrims' sense of collectivity and heightened emotion arise because participants are freed from everyday structural constraints, and he introduced the term 'communitas' to describe a 'spontaneously generated relationship between levelled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes' (Turner, 1973: 216). As Ehrenreich (2007) explains, this helped give pilgrimage and the analysis of group behaviour a legitimate place in anthropology. However, as she continues, there is a sense in which 'it was a marginal and second-rate place' (Ehrenreich, 2007: 11); such collective events were characterised as offering a form of occasional relief from more structured everyday reality.

Moreover, this characterisation of collective events as marginal to the bread and butter issues of social science meant that their analysis was rarely informed by theories of everyday social and psychological processes and slipped instead into a rather mystical celebration of 'anti-structure'. Nor

does this emphasis on the liminality of pilgrimage encourage consideration of how the analysis of such events could feed back into helping us understand the nature of society and everyday social processes. However, recent empirical research (typically of crowds in conflict) shows the linkages between crowd events and wider social processes (Reicher, 2011). So too, recent studies of pilgrimage have been increasingly sensitive to how what happens in pilgrimage is bound up with (and illuminates) wider social processes beyond the event itself. Most obviously, recent studies show that a sense of collectivity and joy is not always achieved and that one often finds factionalism and conflict. For example, Messerschmidt and Sharma (1981) identified numerous social divisions amongst Hindu pilgrims attending an event in Nepal, and concluded that if anything ‘this pilgrimage is fundamentally and unequivocally a structure-*affirming* occasion’ (Messerschmidt and Sharma, 1981: 572, emphasis original). Moreover, and again questioning the characterisation of pilgrimage as liminal to everyday life, researchers have highlighted the degree to which the meanings of a religious site may be contested (Sallnow, 1981; Eade and Sallnow, 1991). Nor is such factionalism and conflict simply the perversion of a fraternalistic ideal. By their nature, religious sites are vessels into which competing meanings may be poured, and wider, everyday collective identities contested (Coleman, 2002). This is one reason why the Prayag Melas attract politicians and activists from across the political spectrum.

Given the problems associated with conceptualising crowd events in general (and pilgrimage in particular) as beyond the realm of everyday social processes, we believe much may be gained through founding our analysis on social psychological theory developed to analyse everyday group behaviour.

Social Identities

Over the last 40 years social psychological analyses of group behaviour have changed dramatically. The concept of *social identity* developed as an alternative to theories which sought to explain group phenomena in terms of personal and interpersonal processes. Henri Tajfel (1978) drew a distinction between individual-level and group-level processes which was developed by John Turner (1982) and elaborated in what became known as *self-categorisation theory* (SCT) (Turner *et al.*, 1987). This approach to collective behaviour emphasises the role of social categories in self and other construal. It argues that the self and others may be defined at different levels of abstraction. Sometimes this may

be in terms of individual uniqueness. At other times it may be in terms of specific social categories that give rise to particular social identities. This shift in the salience of individual-level *personal* and group-based *social* identities is psychologically important and makes group behaviour possible. Specifically, the basis for group formation lies in the cognitive act of self-categorisation: it is when people define themselves in terms of membership of the same social category, rather than their unique individuality, that they begin to act as group members. First, people's behaviour is in accordance with their understanding of their collective identity. Second, people's social relations with one another are changed such that to the degree that they view themselves as sharing a common identity, their interactions are more trustful (Tyler and Blader, 2001), respectful (Renger and Simon, 2011) and helpful (Levine *et al.*, 2005; Wakefield *et al.*, 2011).

In recent years this approach to groups has been applied to crowds. Research shows that crowd behaviour is neither random nor uncontrolled but is in accordance with crowd members' understanding of their common social identity (Reicher, 1984). Moreover, unlike traditional social psychological models, which explain group processes as arising out of inter-personal bonds between individuals, the social identity approach is capable of explaining how erstwhile strangers can come together and act together in large-scale collective action. This explains how people – even if they have never met before – can cohere as fellow Catholics in St Peter's Square, as fellow protestors in Tahir Square, or as fellow Manchester United fans at Old Trafford. Moreover, it is when people self-define in terms of a common category that they feel more comfortable in close proximity with fellow group members (Novelli *et al.*, 2010).

Yet, if a common social identity makes group behaviour possible, a common identification cannot be assumed. How an individual conceptualises themselves is variable and the emergence of a shared social identification, a social accomplishment. The boundaries of belonging (who is/is not included), and what it means to identify as a group member can be contested in argument (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2004; 2009) and such arguments are sustained and re-shaped by all manner of social practices. For example, analyses of intergroup conflict at demonstrations show how the indiscriminate policing of an otherwise heterogenous collection of individuals and groups can bring about the emergence of a unified and oppositional crowd identity (Reicher, 1996; Drury and Reicher,

2000). Research also shows that although self-definition is important, one's identity is also bound up with the responses of others: just because one identifies with others does not mean such others will recognise and reciprocate that shared identification (Hopkins, 2011; Joyce *et al.*, 2012), and without such recognition of one's social identification, the experience of that identification (no matter how dearly it is held) may be compromised (Hopkins and Greenwood, 2013).

In sum, this social identity perspective on group processes provides a coherent framework with which to approach all manner of routine group processes (conformity, trust, leadership, the provision of mutual support and so on), and has been shown to be of value in analysing conflictual crowd events. We also believe it can help illuminate aspects of a pilgrim's life, and in what follows we reflect on themes arising from our interviews with 37 Kalpwasis (24 men and 13 women, average age 64) conducted in 2010 and from ethnographic observations taken shortly before, during, and shortly after the 2011 Mela. For details on the interview schedule, and the ethnography (which focused on two different Kalpwasis, resulting in a combined total of 115 days of field notes) see Shankar *et al.* (2013) and Pandey *et al.* (2014). These data were gathered by the third and fourth authors (both Indian Hindus) and analysed by a team led by the first and second authors (white English and Irish respectively).

Shared Identity in the Mela

The Scope of Shared Identification

The crowds at the Mela may appear an undifferentiated mass. However, the self-definitions of those attending the event are complex and the Kalpwasis routinely differentiate themselves from non-Kalpwasis visiting the event for a day or two and who combine their bathing in the Ganges with a visit to the funfair or the markets. For example, Kalpwasis often complained that the latter's behaviour was inappropriate because they did not 'know' how to perform rituals properly or because they had a more touristic ethos and exhibited less considerate behaviour. Thus, one interviewee (P15: male, 73 years) complained:

... guys of a young age come. They run and move, some boatman are also like this, who run and move around. The youngsters do this – they do not realize that some old man might fall from their [carelessness]. But the Kalpwasis who are there, they do not do this [Interviewer: They do not?] They take care of this thing.

Another (P6: male, 53 years), argued that different sorts of people attended the Mela and that ‘some come for pleasure’. Using a metaphor of a hand, he continued: ‘all the fingers are not alike, some people are here for fun’, and continued ‘but there are no Kalpwasis, no Kalpwasis like that ... [Kalpwasis] all help each other, nothing like that! The people who come, come for bathing. Outside people come, so sometimes, some people come for fun, so sometimes they push and like that’.

Kalpwasis also observed that the presence of these others could limit their own mobilities and their freedom to bathe as they wished. So, when asked if there were differences between Kalpwasis and others ‘who come here only for bathing’, one interviewee (P21: female, 60 years) replied ‘There is quite a lot of difference. Actually it creates trouble. Like when there is more crowd, the police will put barrier[s] on the way while coming and going’. This interrupted the Kalpwasis’ routines: ‘The police will stop. They don’t understand’. Worse, some complained that amongst the non-Kalpwasis there were thieves or young men whose only purpose in bathing was to sneak a look at female bathers. In turn, several reported avoiding areas of the Mela site that were frequented by non-Kalpwasis. Thus, even the Mela site was socially differentiated with consequences for the Kalpwasis’ mobility and their spiritual experience of place.

The Psychological Significance of Shared Identity

If Kalpwasis often reported a psychological distance from non-Kalpwasis at the Mela, they also reported a sense of commonality with other Kalpwasis. This could be expressed in various ways. It often entailed references to family-based metaphors (see too PMMRG, 2007). For example, one (P 34: male, 55 years) explained that ‘each Kalpwasi, for this one month, feels that we are in our home with our family’. Another (P 11: male, 72 years), explained that when Kalpwasi met each other they would ‘do *pranam*’ (that is a gesture of respect) and that ‘here, the Kalpwasi family is one!’ Moreover, they continued: ‘Kalpwasis are a family, all with each other! After getting out from here, there, somewhere in the market, people who have come will meet, will do *pranam* and would talk, how was the time spent ... Here the Kalpwasis are family! Everybody is a saint’.

Here there is a clear sense of a shared social identification as Kalpwasis. This does not simply mean that one identifies with a given social category. Nor does it mean that oneself and others identify with the same social category. Rather, there is a sense that crowd members view themselves

and each-other in terms of this common social category (Neville and Reicher, 2011), and in this extract this is signaled by the mutual giving and receiving of a greeting (*pranam*) which conveys heightened respect (for a discussion of the role of normatively prescribed greetings in communicating the mutual recognition of identities, see Hopkins and Greenwood, 2013).

A shared identity also entails a sense of common purpose. This was often most conveyed in Kalpwasis' reflections on how the crowds at the Mela compared with those elsewhere, for example at Indian railway stations. One (P10: male 55 years) explained that the Kalpwasi crowds constituted 'some sort of cultural crowd, you can call it a cultural crowd. You can't sleep all night, loudspeakers are blaring, there is noise. People are singing Lord Ram's name. The reciting of the Ramayana is going on. There are religious songs going on. All these things'. He then turned to the crowds at the railway station and observed:

... that crowd is not social, it is personal. This [the Kalpwasi crowd] is a social crowd. You can call it a social and cultural crowd. This is the difference. That [the railway crowd] is the crowd of necessity. Since people are passing through, there is a crowd. Here, people stay put, we have to stay for one month, sing religious songs, *Sita-Rama, Sita-Rama, Om Namah Shivay*, this is what we have to do.

Here there is a clear contrast between what is essentially an aggregate of individuals each with their different interests and goals (the railway station) and a collective entity with a common identity and purpose (Kalpwasi as the Mela).

Furthermore, in contexts where others are construed as fellows (such that there is a psychological connection or communion), their presence adds to one's own experience of the event. Sometimes others' presence was important because it validated beliefs associated with their shared identity as Kalpwasi. Thus one (P30 male, 40 years), using the unit of a *lakh* (100,000) and referring to *darshan* (glimpsing the divine), explained that the presence of the crowd showed that:

I, alone, am not the only one associated with this *dharma*, *laks* of people have faith, they are seekers of *darshan*!
[Interviewer: OK] This tells us that why the crowd comes here, I alone do not come here because the purpose for which I have come ... a crowd of *laks* of people have come and their purpose is the same.

As a corollary, a lack of a crowd may be greeted with disappointment (and not relief), and this respondent explained 'if there was no crowd, so what will someone do? ... The meaning of Mela is the crowd. If there is no crowd, the Mela would feel bad [Interviewer: OK] the Mela won't feel right'.

Shared Identity and the Co-ordination of Behaviour

The wider significance of a shared identity amongst Kalpwasis is that it facilitates individuals' attempts to realise the behaviours associated with their Kalpwasi identity. Most obviously, a shared identity aligns individuals' intentions and behaviours and such an alignment is psychologically and socially important. For example, the Kalpwasi social identity entails seeking to relinquish worldly concerns so that one can devote oneself to spiritual matters (especially bathing and prayer rituals). This requires considerable individual effort. However, it is not simply an individual achievement. As Kalpwasis live cheek by jowl alongside each other the behaviour of one's fellows is not incidental to one's ability to realize and enact the values and ideals of the Kalpwasi identity. Thus, if one is to avoid the distractions of music or argument, it is important that music and angry voices do not intrude into one's environment. Individual Kalpwasis can decide whether to visit the more commercial or touristy areas of the Mela site (and typically avoided doing so, in part because the non-religious noise associated with such areas is judged as intrusive and as incongruent with their Kalpwasi identity). However, an individual Kalpwasi cannot avoid their fellow Kalpwasis, and their shared commitment to identity-related injunctions is crucial to the ability of any one individual to realise those injunctions.

Similar issues arise in relation to the injunction that one should not gossip. If this goal is to be realised it is important that others share one's identity-related commitments, for without this, one's own ability to live up to this identity-related ideal could easily be compromised. Again, the point is that a shared identity is important because it facilitates one's own ability to enact one's Kalpwasi identity. This is well-illustrated in the following exchange in which the interviewee refers to the concept of *satsang* which translates roughly as an assembly of persons who listen to and speak spiritual truths. First, the interviewee (P37: female, 62 years) stressed the importance of experiencing this *satsang*. Second, she then continued to explain that a key element in achieving this was to avoid mundane gossiping about others' failings. Thus, she explained that:

... the most important thing here is the *satsang*. No one gossips about others. No one wants or looks for failings in others ... All become like one family. This is what is called *satsang*. Kalpwas means this only – that you do not criticize or gossip about each other. Each one follows the rules.

Here there is a clear sense in which the commonality of purpose associated with the sharing of a collective identity facilitates an individual's ability to enact group-related ideals and injunctions. In turn, it becomes clear just why the experience of a shared identity can be so rewarding: others' behaviour helps build or scaffold the social context in which one can more easily express one's Kalpwasi identity. Indeed, this same interviewee continued to explain that it was through being able to 'follow the rules' (for example, avoiding gossip and other worldly activities) that they could achieve their spiritual goals such that 'for one month we see heaven, after that daughter, [we are] again in to that same *mayajaal*' (a term referring to the trap of worldly affairs).

This social scaffolding can take diverse forms. A shared identity encourages people to act in terms of a common understanding of identity-appropriate behaviour, and some of these forms of behaviour may add to one's spiritual experience. Some activities (for example, walking, singing, chanting) can result in an 'embodied-sensory-affective-spiritual experience' of the environment (Maddrell and della Dora, 2013b). Moreover, the fact that one participates with others in such performances contributes to this experience. Thus, when asked about her experience of the crowd, one (P25: female, 60 years) explained:

We feel good. All move singing and playing instruments, the ones who know the song, join them in singing [Interviewer: Yes] we chant, we recite, whatever is on the sound system we join in [Interviewer: Yes] it transforms the mind. We don't even remember our home, where we are. There is so much of noise (laughs).

To sing or chant on one's own is one thing, but to do it collectively is another, and is experienced positively because it helps immerse one in a world where everyday concerns are but distant memories. It should also be noted that such data illustrate the wider point that any assumption that a noisy environment is psychologically draining must be treated with caution: if the noise is construed as identity-affirming it can be experienced positively (Shankar *et al.*, in press; see too Srinivasan *et al.*, 2013).

Shared Identity and Social Support

In addition to facilitating the co-ordination of identity-related behaviour, a shared identity may also be experienced positively because of the belief that if one needs help, support from one's fellows will be available. Certainly, our interviewees reported expecting to receive help should they need it. For

example, one (P6: male, 53 years) explained that ‘we like the crowd ... there is no question of trouble ... see I feel that the purpose for which I am here, they are also here – everyone is taking dip together’. When asked if these others ever disturbed their rituals, his friend interjected ‘no’ and explained that there was mutual support. As she put it, ‘if we don’t have match-stick, we will ask for it from someone and they will give, if they will ask for something from us, we will give’, at which point the original interviewee continued ‘so everyone helps ... they pay attention on each other, I don’t think outside anyone will do this much!’

Of course, it might be that the interviewees are mistaken in their evaluation of the differential likelihood of receiving support from their fellow Kalpwasis and those outside the Mela. However, that is not necessarily the issue. Rather, the point is that these interviewees *expected* support from their fellow Kalpwasis, and the expectation of support can, in and of itself, be important in creating a sense of confidence in going out into and enjoying the world. This confidence is particularly important in an environment such as the Mela. As we have hinted, pursuing everyday routines – particularly when it is so cold – poses considerable difficulties and a shared identity with others can help one manage them such that one can accomplish one’s obligations as a Kalpwasi (Pandey *et al.*, 2014). More generally, the supportive relations (even with those whom one does not know) associated with a shared identity facilitates a sense of trusting others. Amongst our interviewees, this was manifested in the belief that others would not harm them (for example, through stealing their property) and several recounted stories in which fellow Kalpwasis ensured that lost items were returned to them. It was also manifested in the belief that those with whom one shared an identity as Kalpwasis would proffer help whenever it was needed, drawing contrasts between what could be expected in the Mela and back home. For example, one (P16: female, 57) explained ‘in the home, or in villages, people see each other and feel tensions [Interviewer: OK] Yes. Sometimes because of their earning, sometimes because of looks, sometimes because of fighting. In village it’s like this, But here, so much of goodness comes in people, even more than at home’. She continued ‘someone will say “come sister sit, warm up your hands and feet” ... It feels good. And there [back home], if you interact more, even in a family, the close relatives cannot stay long with each other!’

The Longer-term Impact of Participation

Thus far we have considered how a shared identity with other Kalpwasis shaped our interviewees' experiences in the Mela. In doing so we employed a theory shown to have value in explaining everyday social and group processes. Applying this to the Mela allows an appreciation of some of the otherwise seemingly inexplicable pleasures of participation. However, the question remains, to what extent does what goes on inside the Mela impact upon life outside the Mela, and more generally, what can we learn about everyday life through studying the Mela in this fashion? Our answer to both these questions involves reference to the issue of shared identity and well-being.

As already hinted, pilgrimage sites can be seen as constituting 'therapeutic landscapes' (Maddrell and della Dora, 2013a) with the spiritual meaning of place contributing to well-being (Kamitsis and Francis, 2013). However, the positive outcomes of pilgrimage cannot be assumed. Mass gatherings bring health risks (Memish *et al.*, 2012). The most obvious concern is crushing (and sadly 36 pilgrims attending the 2013 Kumbh Mela died in one such incident at Allahabad's main railway station) or the potential for spreading communicable disease (such as influenza) (Abubakar *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the environmental conditions at such events (including crowding and noise) can give rise to health concerns (Steffen *et al.*, 2012), and when events last as long as the Prayag Melas such risks can only be compounded.

Set against this, we also know that feeling socially connected with others can also contribute to well-being. The more that people are involved in social networks – that is, the more social capital they have – the better they fare (Kawachi *et al.*, 2008; Smith and Christakis, 2008), and interventions that increase one's sense of connectedness with others can improve well-being (Walton and Cohen, 2011). Recently, social psychological research has explored just how and why being a member of a group may improve well-being. Research in institutionalised settings (Haslam *et al.*, 2005; Haslam and Reicher, 2006) and in more informal settings – for example, when a sense of collective identity emerges in response to an emergency (Drury *et al.*, 2009) – shows that sharing a social identity with others can contribute to individuals' well-being (Jetten *et al.*, 2012). Again, the underlying process seems to derive from the sense of 'we-ness' which leads people to believe their fellows will help.

We investigated whether attending the Mela impacted on well-being with a survey of a sample of 416 Kalpwasis and 127 comparable others who did not attend the Mela (see Tewari *et al.*, 2012). Both samples were visited in their home villages in December 2010 (before the Mela) and again in March 2011 (after the Mela), and completed questions which gauged their well-being and prevalence of symptoms of ill-health. The two samples were similar in age (one average the Kalpwasis were aged 64, the Controls, 61), gender (57 per cent of the Kalpwasis were female, 50 per cent of the Controls were female) and caste (Kalpwasis: 92 per cent General Caste (GC), 8 per cent Other Backward Caste (OBC); Controls: 86 per cent GC, OBC 14 per cent). In the pre-Mela survey these two samples reported very similar levels of well-being and symptoms of ill-health. However, after the Mela, the two samples differed, with those who had undertaken the pilgrimage reporting better well-being and fewer symptoms of ill-health (Tewari *et al.*, 2012).

Of course, attending the Mela does pose real health threats and it would be folly to ignore these. However, for many, participating in the Mela seems to benefit well-being. The mechanisms involved are likely to include the meditative practices and cognitive schemas associated with religious belief that facilitate coping (James and Wells, 2003). Yet, more social processes are likely to be involved. Research comparing the health of religious and non-religious people suggests that the oft-found better health of the former is bound up with the fact that being religious involves participation in social networks and social group activity (Green and Elliott, 2010; Lim and Putnam, 2010; Diener *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, our analyses of our survey data suggest that, in part at least, the health outcomes associated with participating in the Mela are bound up with the experience of a shared identity with one's fellow Kalpwasis and the more intimate social relations this allows (Khan *et al.*, 2015a).

Discussion

Throughout this chapter we have seen that viewing pilgrimage as exotic and beyond the range of our theories of everyday social life limits our capacity to comprehend the pleasures of participation. Given Le Bon's influence, it is all too easy to see the pleasures of pilgrimage in terms of a loss of identity and a loss of reason. Moreover, following Turner's (1973) characterisation of pilgrimage as liminal to everyday life, it is easy to slip into seeing the pleasures of pilgrimage as reflecting a rather mystical immersion in a sea of common humanity (Turner's *communitas*). Set alongside colourful images of

naked bodies and bearded holy men, the product is a picture of pilgrimage as mysterious and mysteriously powerful.

As an alternative, we have argued that there is much to be gained through looking at pilgrimage through the lens of theories developed to address everyday social processes. Specifically, we have considered how the social identity approach to group behaviour offers a framework with which to explore just how and why people in collective events experience such intensely positive feelings. Our starting point is that to understand pilgrims' experiences and behaviour we must address their social-categorical self-definitions. As we have seen, they may not identify with all co-present others: the range and scope of their identification is an empirical issue and contingent upon various social processes. At the Prayag Melas some will identify as a particular sort of pilgrim (as Kalpwasis) rather than other sorts of pilgrim (for example, 'day bathers'). Yet, even amongst those who are all formally group members (that is, the Kalpwasis), we cannot assume that all will experience a sense of shared identity. Perhaps because of disagreements over the nature of certain ritual practices or because of more mundane disagreements over the use of shared water or toilet facilities, some Kalpwasis will not identify with their neighbours. Moreover, even if a Kalpwasi does identify with these others, it is not necessarily the case that these others would reciprocate. To identify with a group is one thing, however to have a sense of shared identity with others it is crucial that others recognise you as a fellow group member. Others' recognition of one's common identity can be exhibited in all manner of ways (for example, the greetings one receives: Hopkins and Greenwood, 2013) and evidence from other collective events (a St Patrick's Day celebration: Pehrson *et al.*, 2013) shows that where participants believe that their sense of shared identification with others is not reciprocated, the experience can be profoundly dispiriting and alienating.

Our key point is that the pleasures of pilgrimage are intelligible. To the degree that one identifies with others and believes this to be reciprocated (such that there is a sense of shared identity), one's experience will be positive. A shared social identity allows an alignment of goals and facilitates the social co-ordination of behaviour such that individuals can better realise the injunctions associated with their pilgrim identity (for quantitative data on this see Khan *et al.*, 2015b). Moreover, a shared social identity provides a resource when the going gets tough which can contribute to one's

health and well-being after the event is over (Khan *et al.*, 2015a). Of course, other people's company is not always uplifting, and as Sartre's character Garcin intimates (in *No Exit*), hell can indeed be 'other people'. However, with a sense of shared social identity one's fellows may not only be less hellish but may contribute to one's pilgrimage experience. Indeed, and as we saw in an earlier quote (in which a woman spoke of the pleasures of being with others who also sought to lead a simple spiritual life), others can help one create a little heaven on earth such that 'for one month we see heaven'.

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