Sacred Space, Sacred Water: Exploring the Role of Water in India’s Sacred Places.

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Abstract

This paper is exploratory in discussing the importance of water to sacred spaces in India. Traditional Hindu practices of pilgrimage have evolved because of many years of movement to places where the power of natural forces may be seen but as yet not necessarily highlighted in the literature. In the paper’s exploration of this topic, significant features are considered and a framework to categorise water usage in sacred space is proposed. By including participant observation from a visit to Puri, India, changing attitudes, perspectives and practices in the pilgrimage experience in India today are also evidenced. In this example and at how water features in the experiences of sacred spaces in India, it is clear that there are attributes given to the water that reach beyond basic needs and may affect levels of consciousness. Consequently the conclusion of the paper is that the role of water is more significant than first appears and water is sacred space in its own right.

Introduction

This paper will discuss sacred space and its proximity to and connection with water in India. Observations will be made about tourism activity in India and the historical role of pilgrimage. The sacred spaces and their usage will be shown to demonstrate the shared construct of heritage culture and identity to include human participation. An overlap between domestic tourism and pilgrimage is also discussed by including an account of a visit to Puri, Orissa, one of India’s most sacred places.

Singh (2012) has described how an infrastructure for travellers existed in India over 2000 years ago and an intention to travel the country to learn as well as demonstrate religious dedication has continued as religious beliefs have evolved over time. The resulting mix may be confusing from the outside but there are examples of different religious believers being
seen as devotees sharing the same sacred space particularly outside urban areas (Tully & Wright 2002). Consequently, as different social and religious communities have contributed to the development of India, authors like Singh (2012) are keen to emphasise the importance of Indian civilisation rather than Hindu civilisation because there has been a co-existence of a range of religious communities for thousands of years. Eck (1981) sees the tirthas (literally fords or crossings but now meaning sacred spaces) as a unifying force, showing that India has been brought together by the journeys of pilgrims and posits that this led to the unifying belief in Mother India. French (2011) supports this notion by declaring that all groups nowadays have a strong sense of loyalty to the Indian constitution, learned as children. Pilgrimage is the dominant form of tourism in India and this is not exclusively for Hindus. Sikhs for example visit many sites in the North of India, including the Temple in Amritsar (Singh 2012). Muslims also visit the many thousands of tombs and graves of Muslim saints, admittedly secondary to the main pilgrimage to Mecca known as the hajj (Bharati 1963). There is considerable potential for other sacred site visitors, as Batra (2003) recognised in following the route of the Buddha throughout the breadth of India, where he sees much that is relevant for visitors interested in Buddhism. Bharati (1963) noted that many Buddhist sites had been adopted by Hindus too.

Therefore, sacred space is everywhere in India (Bhardwaj 1973). It is most usual to find sacred spaces that have local, regional and/or national significance that are (in most cases) open to all, where tolerance and acceptance prevail. The going there and the being there is perceived as connecting with a powerful force (Eck 1981), and so the necessity to visit these sacred spaces is deep in the national psyche and serves as a unifying force (Gladstone 2005). Even if there is not a religious motivation, the draw of the sites is considerable, visiting sacred places or undertaking a religious pilgrimage (for Hindus this is called the tirtha-yatra) is one of the many ways of demonstrating religious devotion. In Hinduism, these journeys help in moving towards enlightenment, or moksha, a much sought after condition which allows the higher conscious state of self-realisation and bliss where the release from the cycle of life and death is achieved. In addition to the draw of the attractions and sacred space, improved access has encouraged more people to take trips. Inevitably, when people travel away from home and use local amenities there is overlap with tourism. This blurring has been widely discussed in tourism literature (see Gladstone 2005; Collins-Kreiner 2010 for examples).

This topic is of interest for a number of reasons, firstly because the interpretation of pilgrimage experience is worthy of discussion as a way to deepen understanding (Collins-Kreiner 2010), that there is a surge of interest in religious tourism (McLean & Hurd 2012) and changes in the experience that come with this growth are a concern (Shinde 2000), especially where protection of the landscape and natural resources should be considered (Jellicoe and Jellicoe 1995). In thinking about water in particular, Prideaux & Cooper (2009) challenge researchers to extend the discussion of rivers, saying that they have been poorly recognised in the literature to date. Eck (1981) has noted the complexity of the cultural symbolism of the river in India warrants further discussion. The translation of the term tirtha-yatra is now understood as meaning pilgrimage but literally means a ford-crossing a river and suggests that water and pilgrimage in India are inextricably linked. Eck (1981) also points out that tirtha now means sacred waters in South India. This development of language and meaning reinforces what Morris (2011) describes as the interaction between the natural world and human society that is often forgotten, and so we need to be reminded, especially when we seek to understand heritage and culture.
Background

In writing about pilgrimage in India, Bhardwaj (1973) surveyed five thousand pilgrims and pioneered details about the categories of sacred sites and their visitors. The notion of a ‘pecking order’ or hierarchy of sites, as Borsay notes (2006: 169), is familiar and historical. Information reveals that European medieval pilgrims had similar views. Furthermore, the similarity remains true with European tourists today whose attitude reflects a hierarchy of fashions and trends.

There are many ways to accelerate access, whether to a divine place or to an exclusive restaurant, as proven by those with the wherewithal and appropriate connections. This is not meant to trivialise but to compare behaviours, however, attempts to categorise are the source of some conceptual debate in the tourism literature (Timothy 2011). One example concerns Graburn’s (1989) description of tourism in India as ‘ethnic tourism’, which combines the three aspects of culture, history and nature. More recently, Shinde (2000) has made observations on what is described as the commodification of pilgrimages, leading to a conclusion that the descriptor should be religious tourism. The move towards packaged tours therefore appears to take away from the authentic pilgrimage experience which was one of taking the necessary time through peregrination and circumambulation (Shinde 2000). More recently, Timothy (2011) is emphatic in his belief that religious tourism is a subset of heritage tourism, saying that the visits to sites (and in India they are known as heritage sites) covers those with spiritual and cultural interests and would incorporate the specified rituals and specialists involved in India’s sacred places (Shinde 2000).

Changes to the way that people engage with the pilgrimage type of experience are bound to happen over time. The drivers are familiar ones, such as improved access after developing the supporting infrastructure, along with a more affluent society generating a larger middle class. However in India, the response to this increased demand and mass movement in Indian domestic tourism is dominated by the informal sector (Gladstone 2005). The term ‘informal’ may be somewhat misleading, since the size of the activity is enormous. Domestic tourism numbers in India in 2010 were approximately 740 million and regardless of statistical limitations, these figures have demonstrated continual growth since their recording began (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India July 2011). To provide some perspective, the volume of people engaged in pilgrimage is so great that domestic tourist arrivals are greater than the number of international tourist arrivals in the entire world (World Tourism Organisation (WTO), as cited in Gladstone 2005: 163). Over a quarter of a century ago, there was a suggestion by Bhardwaj (1985) that circulator movements like the Indian pilgrimage were not seen as consequential because of their non-economic motives. Singh (cited in Gladstone 2005) also claimed that there was very little attempt to gather data about domestic tourists. Despite this, both Dalrymple (2010) and Timothy (2011) have noted sacred space usage changes by commenting on the figures now available, showing over half of all domestic tours are to pilgrimage destinations.

When discussing nature tourism, Graburn, for example, recognises that ‘land, sea and sky perform their magical works of renewal’ and notes that an important factor in restorative scenery is the absence of others, because sharing means a loss of power (1989: 31). This is in direct contradiction to the Indian perspective where sharing creates power, and the more popular a sacred space is, the more divine it becomes. ‘Cumulative devotion’ makes the tirthas into tirthas (Eck 1981: 342). Gaining access to the chosen space and its associated deity may be purchased and the pilgrim may even be a representative of another who is unable to visit (Gladstone 2005). The purchase of favours may be helpful for those tourists.
who desire to see a particular attraction, for example for those who are short of time or not
wishing to stay in line for a long time. Some may gain speedier entry into the temple by
paying more for ‘special’ as opposed to ‘ordinary’ access (Lonely Planet Guide 2007: 302).
This outlook is a challenge for others, as is the difficulty in grappling with multiple meanings
and variations in practices. Meethan’s (2001) discussion on the significance of tourism space
is helpful because he recognises that there is an order to the way that spaces are used which
accounts for the tangible and intangible and that wherever and whenever it is possible, people
are engaging with and experiencing places by involving themselves. He acknowledges that
there are local, regional, national and global aspects to the way that spaces are consumed and
viewed and so these ‘processes need to be considered as dynamic systems of change’
(Meethan 2001: 168). He continues by stating that representational spaces, those of lived
experience, show localized forms of knowledge encompassing not only a set of norms
governing practices. He also suggests that knowledge about [sacred] space is open to
constant reinterpretation and transformation and therefore, an understanding of space is
gained by the changes that take place there (Meethan 2001).

There is a hierarchy amongst the experience of the places and the variations in
perspective. Bhardwaj (1985) speaks of levels of places (local, regional, national) and
motives of the pilgrims where concerns (life-cycle, job security and the birth of a son for
example) are taken to the local sacred places. In this situation, regional and national sacred
places are more about being in contact with the divine and so are more concerned with
sanctity than material gain (Bhardwaj 1985). To say that this is straightforward would be
misleading, however, since there are no easily recognisable measurable categories for
Indian sacred sites’ status. Tamils (living in the South of India) for instance, attend the temple
complex in Madurai on the Vaigai River, where the Golden Lotus Tank offers sacred bathing.
This is deemed the regional pinnacle for Tamils, but at the same time, bathing at the source of
a river such as at Gangotri (the place closest to the source of the Ganges) or at places
marking the land’s end like Puri also offers particular benefit. Gladstone (2005: 173) cites
Gold’s (1982) work where Rajasthani pilgrims were thrilled by swimming in the Bay of
Bengal, claiming it was the highlight of their religious trip. The pleasure gained was a mix of
swimming in the outdoors and being at the land’s end close to the abode of Lord Vishnu.
Many devotees see bathing in the Ganges as valuable because it is so embedded within the
sacred literature and only the most devout Hindu scholar would see this as superior to
meditation. (Bhardwaj 1985).

Sacred Water

Pilgrimage destinations are often places of natural beauty, such as river sources or
confluences, coastlines or hilltops and this worship of mountains and rivers is embedded in
the traditions of South Asia (Albinia 2008). Eck (1981) explains that places themselves are
sacred and a mountain or a river becomes the focus of the devotion (particularly when
discussing Hindu piety). As can be seen in many examples throughout the world there is
often a long history of devotion in a particular location and whilst the beliefs may change, the
site itself remains a sacred space. The origins of such places are often traced to the fusion of
beliefs, and in India this fusion was between the belief in life-force deities of the indigenous
people and the Aryan invaders (Eck 1981: Those living in the Indus Valley around 1500
B.C. worshipped place spirits, and the powers of nature were seen as beings, as an example,
with trees and water spirits, while the Aryans brought ideas of the heavens and gods in the
sky. Hinduism was an amalgam of these two and taught that the wicked may be reincarnated
in animal form and that the good could be absorbed into a ‘changeless and timeless state’
The earliest Indian records show that the Indian indigenous people revered rivers and so Bhardwaj (1973) suggests that this may be where the notion of the *tirthas* (fords) originates. Reverence for the power of the river was not exclusive to India and Indians, as Albinia (2008) notes, and even Alexander the Great added Indian rivers to his list of rivers for worship once he was confronted with the size and might of the Indus River. The reverence for rivers is also evidenced in the ancient Hindu scriptures where there are references to waters flowing between heaven and earth and that by crossing the rivers there is the chance of reaching heaven. Here the link between travelling for pilgrimage and the significance of river crossings is evident (Bhardwaj 1973; Eck 1981).

In trying to understand this ancient connection, Eck (1981) analysed the origins of the word *tirtha* and its roots and subsidiaries, where she notes that all of these are connected with passage and transport. The seeking of fords for safe crossing has also been at the heart of the well-being of travellers and so the far shore became an apt and powerful symbol for the spiritual traveller (Eck 1981). Her exploration in ancient Sanskrit further reveals the word is connected with pure drinking water, the ‘nectar of immortality’, and also to indicate a place of bathing (Eck 1981: 327). Her research into the origins and usage of the words has led to other discoveries in Jain and Buddhist literature, as well as other Hindu ancient scriptures. This is a rich seam of discovery with references to internal crossings and the use of breathing techniques in the yogic tradition, or externally by crossing points in ritual, time and space.

The repetitive pouring of water by Hindu devotees as part of their rituals may be seen at temples and by the side of Indian rivers. This continuous pouring of the water over the symbol or body is representative of the life-giving force of the water. Dousing the idol within a temple may be for a number of reasons but when dedicated to the Hindu Lord Shiva is a representation of diluting the poison that he was said to have kept in his throat (the reason why his throat is depicted in blue). The participatory act is a demonstration of devotion. Jug after jug of water is used to connect with the divine and wash away perceived difficulties of say ‘trouble, old age and death’ and helps the crossing over into a place of joy after death (Eck 1981: 330). The *ghats* (designated spaces) allow access to the river and are filled with people washing themselves or their clothes, performing rituals or simply staring. Many place offerings of flowers and food and it is acts like these that Weerasinghe (2012), like Eck (1981) before him, see as the living heritage bringing meaning to both places and people.

The transforming experience from conventional life as offered by undertaking a visit to a *tirtha* has been a less expensive option than other religious rites, especially for the poorer people in society. The crossing of boundaries of birth also allows an egalitarianism never otherwise experienced for women and outcastes (ordinarily excluded from many rites) who are bathing in the same waters as the most revered priests. The purifying power of the waters brings never-ending blessings. There is always the notion of the crossing, beyond birth and death into the light of knowledge from earth into heaven.

The potency of the notion of the *tirtha-yatra* is not to be underestimated. The link with water is inextricable, for even the name India comes from the name of the river Indus (Albinia 2008). Rivers are seen to be caretakers such as mothers (and therefore female), unlike the sea which is male (Baedeker 2009). The Ganges, or Mother Ganga in particular, is believed to flow through all worlds (heaven, earth, and underworld) and epitomises purity. The Ganges therefore acts like a magnet for practical and celebratory reasons. The culmination of this is seen at its most extreme at the time of the Kumbh Mela (a religious festival that takes place every 12 years celebrating the creation myths of Hinduism (Tully 1991). It was last held at Allahabad in 2001, and is arguably the largest pilgrimage gathering on earth with approximately 70 million people in attendance. At the time, it was observed that 10 million devotees at a time were immersed in the water, making it a river of humans trying to join with the divine (Carr-Gomm 2008).
In their preface, Prideaux and Cooper (2009) claim that rivers are recreational sites. I’d just note to the author that this is arguably not true with fishing, swimming, and rowing (amongst other recreational activities) having been undertaken on (and in) rivers for well over 150 years. This, to me at least, is not ‘recent’, but when ‘fresh water is a scarce resource …recreational use may not rank highly’ (2009: 2). The importance of this, as well as the thirst of the pilgrim, is thought to be assuaged by the water men at the entrance to Hindu temples, who distribute free cups of spring water to pilgrims (Dalrymple 2010). The basic and the sacred merge in many instances and where an overturned stone is now worshipped as a murti, or idol/statue, because it appeared in the dream of a poet, and was interpreted as a visit from the god Pabu. The overturned stone led to a source of water now known as Pabusar (Pabu’s well) in Rajasthan, which is an unusually dry location (Dalrymple 2010).

Developing countries have been criticised for their division of resources for international tourists, and in India, water shortages are commonplace. The difficulties that locals experience with water shortages highlight what many in the World take for granted, as illustrated in accounts of Gladstone (2005) in his Indian-run New Delhi hotel. It is also described by Chakravarty (2000) in a case study discussion of Elephanta Island, in Mumbai, where the population exists mainly on water from wells. Organisations, such as Tourism Concern in the UK, have attempted to raise awareness and funds for improving the water supply in tourism destinations like Goa, where there are limited and polluted water resources for locals.

Surviving the forces of nature may be uppermost in the minds of some when they come into contact with water. Tales of shipwreck and drowning are commonplace among the annual flooding incidents. The flooding in Damodar River in Jharkhand, inspired the following song:

On the banks of this river of life,
My heart swings and my life swings,
I drown and gulp in the currents
Beyond the reach of grand thought
My heart swings and my life swings…
No one will stay with you forever,
We will all go down the same path
Old or young.
Who are we?
Where are we from?
Where will we go to?
We deceive ourselves, Bhaba the madman says,
Exulting in moments of laughter, tears and play.
We’ll drown in endless waters
Caught in this earthly mandala of illusion and desire
My heart swings and my spirit swings


Baul songs (from the wandering Bauls or minstrels in Bengal and Bangladesh) such as this one often depict the journey through life as a river and the body as a boat (Dalrymple 2010), and the ‘boatmen or helmsman as the spiritual preceptor’ (Sen 2007: 77). The imagery here is strong and emphasizes the preciousness of water as a crucial characteristic. Bharati (1963) highlights the strong belief in the purity of water, which implies that physical and moral impurity is everywhere. The drive for cleanliness is evidenced historically too, and Dalrymple (2002) describes Eighteenth Century British visitors to India learning new
regimes in hygiene. They learned to bathe and shampoo their hair regularly (the word shampoo entered the English language at this time, coming from the Hindi word for massage).

Nowadays the reverence for water’s power is still yielding insights as Carr-Gomm (2008) discovered while reading a Hindu scripture that said the water of the Ganges would help the old and infirm. Recent environmental testing of pollution levels in the Ganges have led to the discovery of bacteriophages that kill bacteria better than antibiotics (without known side effects). Such medicinal qualities are attached to the waters of a number of sacred sites and have inspired notable legends about the lake in Amritsar, which is now used for ritual bathing of the ailing Sikh community.

In contrast to the utilitarian approach to the understanding of the significance of water and its deified roles in the lives of humans, there is also the role of water as reflective space. Many temples incorporate water in their location, and as has been explained previously, the water may be the reason for the construction of the temple, although there is also the value of water in the design of the buildings, as is shown by the Taj Mahal where the fluidity of the reflective pools creates and distorts images and possibly inspires spiritual power and mystery (Altman 2002). Most likely the water offers space for all to commune in their own way whether by literally crossing it, or as a liminal space. The throngs of people visiting the major Dhamas (the most spiritual Hindu places in India) may also be in need of places to meditate and water may indeed offer respite. Being in or near the water and possibly performing devotions or simply experiencing the place, may afford the opportunity to connect with the place and where a refuge is provided by the traditions themselves provide a refuge (Fallon 2012).

While Prideaux and Cooper (2009) recognise that rivers may provide an honourable status and challenge, their typology of river usage ignores a reverence for rivers and their role in the spiritual lives of people. The following table lists how rivers are used in India:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal ablutions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Washing clothes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drinking water</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source of food and livelihood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport /crossing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure - swimming, boating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflective and meditative space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bathing and immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decommissioning sacred artefacts-removes the shakti of the deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispersal of ashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals and offerings</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Exploring the tirtha-yatra

Bhardwaj (1973) and Kaur (1985) have written very detailed accounts about pilgrimage in India. In the tourism literature, both Shinde (2000) and Gladstone (2005) have written short case studies, where Shinde has discussed circumambulation in the Braj region and Gladstone travelled to Piouskar, Rajasthan. These accounts demonstrate that using ethnography is helpful when looking at the local and small-scale circumstances for greater understanding of the details, which may then be seen in a wider context, and helps to understand change (Nash 1996, as cited in Meethan 2001). Meethan has recognised the
benefit of such studies but also says that there needs to be some adaptation of the ‘transformative analytical frameworks’ that are able to absorb the manifestations of change and interactions with such change in both a local and global context (Meethan 2001: 173).

To try and get a sense of the social dimension there is the packaged domestic pilgrimage tour. Embarking upon such a packaged tour, such as a journey from Ranchi to Puri, is a commonplace activity throughout the year. This journey was previously undertaken by one of the authors and is considered an acceptable behaviour for family and peers. Conversations with fellow travellers were a natural part of the group experience and fostered camaraderie. Groups of people board a bus and travel for many hours, breaking the journey with scenic stops but all are primarily focused on reaching one of the most sacred places in India today. Here they spend time visiting religious sites, local attractions and enjoy some time by the sea. There is little to differentiate this experience from thousands of others the world over, when people travel for a short stay away from home. However, the motivation for the trip is deeply rooted in faith and a quest to merge with the divine Lord Jagannath, which they believe will be cleansing.

The field of observation for this study was the visit to Puri, Orissa, one of the Dhamas, and a place that every Hindu knows by name (Bharati 1963). Jagannath and the car procession that is held in August is a significant time in the Hindu calendar, although pilgrims travel there all year round. To investigate this visit, the approach taken was using participant observation based on Robson’s (2002) typology, where the packaged tour involved a group travelling on a 60 seat bus for a period of 5 days /4 nights during November, 2011.

Notes were taken during and after the trip, demonstrating an interpretive approach to the research, and a fluid and responsive type of information gathering which was then added to upon later reflection. There are, of course, limitations with this style of research but as this was an exploratory study into an ethnography of the tour/pilgrimage, there is an emphasis on the description and the development of categories and ‘progressive focusing’ (Wolcott 1994, as cited in Robson 2002: 488). The details of the descriptive observation (based on Robson 2002) included observing behaviours and activities by the immersed observer within the group.

The journey of 560 kms from Ranchi to Puri is uncomfortable as the roads are far from smooth. A direct drive would be at least 12 hours because of the poor quality of the conditions on pot-holed and often congested roads. Stops were near to water for refreshing and relieving and these take place in informal spaces and the itinerary included lakes for bathing for practical as well as for sight-seeing purposes. There was also the drinking of water from special stops in the belief that these were pure and medicinal. After arrival in Puri the sightseeing consisted of visits to the sea and to the temples. The following sections provide some information and observations about the experience:

On the way I asked the elderly ladies sitting next to me, why at their age they are travelling and suffering the uncomfortable journey? They told me that, they are old and would die soon but before death they wanted to see Lord Jagannath. It is believed that seeing the statue of Jagannath will take away the pain/sorrow of life. It not only makes the present life better but also the next life, they said (Personal Communication November 2011).

It also seemed worthwhile to ask the tour organiser some questions and record his answers:

Do your passengers often take offerings to the water?
Yes, while worshiping the water bodies we take flowers, coconuts (depending on place to place), milk, also sweets.
Do many take funeral ashes to the River Ganges?
Every Hindu would prefer to take the ashes of his/her loved ones or family members to Ganga. Due to financial aspects they may not. Also south Indians are not so keen to visit Ganga with ashes.

Are over 50% of domestic tours pilgrimages?
To some extent it's true but not in the big cities. As nowadays people are becoming modern and in the name of modernisation people (especially Hindus) feel ashamed to perform religious rituals. They are not interested in religion and to visit those places. They prefer to visit modern places!
(Personal Communication, November 2011)

Observations on the trip

- The focus was on religious places but there were additional interesting attractions such as the Nandakanan Zoo to see the white tigers. Additionally, regular stops were included where fresh vegetarian food was prepared either beside the roads or for taking on board the bus.
- Some religious sites are designated as heritage sites and a small fee was required upon entry, although much of the space surrounding the sites is not managed and is an informal space for free movement.
- Pilgrims continued their usual arrangements for fasting, if applicable, and undertook their own rituals, that is reading and singing the Bhajan (religious songs and playing of instruments). Seniors (who comprised the majority of the passengers) did not stray far, and concentrated on their devotions.
- Once the bus stopped, group members formed into small clusters to go in search of refreshments and entertainment. In particular, they purchased souvenirs for their families and friends and went to sweet shops.

Where Water is Featured

- Coins were thrown into water (usually the lakes) and this was seen as being like a deposit in the bank, for reaping later rewards.
- Water was used for bathing, crossed by boat and consumed for the benefit of the pilgrims. Ritual offerings were taken to all water spaces as they were seen as sacred and part of this pilgrimage.
- Bathing occurred at regular intervals in lakes, ponds and the sea and took place fully clothed. This was sometimes for practical reasons.
- There was a reverence for the sea and an early start to see the sunrise also included other rituals. A fear of the force of the sea existed for some on the trip, who took offerings to Varun, the Hindu male deity that oversees the oceans. Some refused to fully immerse in the sea but as the tide is very strong there, there was some justification.

The Experience of Puri

- The sacred temple of Jagannath is exclusively for Hindus and entry is controlled by Pandas (temple priests), who monitor all comings and goings. The difficulty with so many visitors means that occasionally there is some behaviour that is not welcoming;
by barring non-Hindus who were near to the entry to the temple, but also by not allowing space for meditation, or to approach close to the deity.

- At first, huge crowding prevented entry and a later visit was required to the innermost sanctum of the temple (known as Garbhagriha) where the deity is placed. Upon arrival, the large number of Pandas (temple priests numbering approximately 1500 in total) were preparing the Bogh, a meal prepared in clay pots in a wood fire and where only traditional native foods are cooked. This food is then distributed amongst the pilgrims after it has been blessed by the deity (Bharati 1963).

- Here there is a strict adherence to rules and when a travelling companion touched a sacred bowl containing food, this was then broken because it was seen as contaminated and compensation was demanded for a replacement. After experiencing frustration at the Pandas and their attempt at extortion, a reasonable price was agreed upon and paid. In the evening, while out alone on foot, the researcher grew concerned that he might be robbed and returned to the hotel by rickshaw.

- The researcher felt strong sensations in visiting the sacred spaces. Tiredness, discomfort and noise notwithstanding, there was also an intense energy during the visits. The draw of the inland waters, while not always needed for immersion, offered a natural and comforting experience that encouraged relaxation. The sea was used for swimming and for enjoyment with friends. The beach was a place for reverence, and while not wishing to appear disrespectful some socialising, and meeting girls took place for the younger male tour passengers.

**Discussion**

The size and scope of the Indian domestic informal tourism sector is just beginning to be understood outside of India with the help of authors such as Gladstone (2005), although the impact of the number of visitors is yet to be fully realised. The domestic tourism experience in India challenges some of the accepted interpretations of tourism. The sheer volume and ways of organisation bring a very different interpretation to thinking about the way that tourism is categorised and what mass tourism means. After a brief discussion with fellow passengers (on top of previous personal experiences undertaken by one of the authors) it was made clear that water is inextricably linked with the pilgrimage experience of tirtha-yatra, where the importance of water is embedded in its very name.

Water features deeply within the ancient history of a country dominated by vast rivers that are used and experienced as sources of life and death. Worship of this water has its own place alongside other sacred spaces for deities who have been linked with this water. The reasons for this are many and varied but most appear to be based on the origins of the religions that are practised today. People will experience water in different ways and a table summarising the role of water in the lives of pilgrims shows the spiritual as well as practical purposes. Examples of sacred water spaces have been taken from the literature to emphasise the significance. There are changes happening in the attitudes and behaviours regarding tirtha-yatra, as a growing middle class of time-poor, cash-rich, potential travellers are looking for their own ways to moksha and the breaking of the cycle of life and death. At the same time, others see that pilgrimage is possible even when they are poor, and it is the informal space afforded to the pilgrims that makes this possible. The brief insights provided here about the experiences of the researcher in the trip to Puri have demonstrated the experience of water in the tirtha-yatra.

While some concerns may be expressed about the changing attitudes about the ways to come close to the deity, the experience of the sacred continues to have significance, as has
been demonstrated throughout history. The new urban middle class may see some behaviours as old-fashioned but they are still drawn by the attraction of the sacred space. In that draw, lies the perceived power, and there is also pluralism around the informal space where all are accommodated. Within the water space, there is a democratisation of the experience that is perhaps not as evident in the temple areas themselves.

Conclusion

The motivation for writing this paper was: to explore the significance of water as a sacred space in India; to add a more human approach to this view of water; and to add to the typologies of physical groups who visit. A plethora of inter-disciplinary sources show the fascination with this topic, although the scope here has been restricted to tourism literature. There are some historic sources that have been extremely useful for providing insights into what is an enormous topic that remains relevant for millions of people. Bhardwaj (1973) pioneered the categorisation and typology of the sacred space, and although he was limited geographically, he surveyed thousands of visitors in several languages. The tourism literature recognises the importance of pilgrimage and its overlap with tourism, although there are few that have fully engaged with the Indian experience.

By achieving a connection with a place and being in or on the water, there is a closer proximity to the deity. In Hinduism, there is the notion of reciprocity and interdependence between humans and gods and by travelling to the place of the deity it may help an individual become one with the deity. Water facilitates this merging.

The practice of pilgrimage today with its ancient and diverse origins continues to be popular. More people visit sacred places now than ever before in the history of India and more people are bathing in sacred waters. The trip to Puri showed how the tour participants connected with places using and experiencing water. Gladstone (2005) has attempted to dispel the myth that the Indian informal domestic tourism sector is not worthy of further investigation, and Eck (1981) demonstrated that pluralism exists in the sacred spaces of India. This has helped to pave the way for Dalrymple (2010), who sees the sacred in India as a democratised space that is available to all. Finally, water does not discriminate, it embraces us all.
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