

International Conference on

Pilgrimages in South Asia: Experiences in ‘Bonding’ or ‘Bridging’?

Dates: 26-27, October 2017
Venue: University of Madras

India is known for sacred places,¹ and pilgrimages/*theerthayatra* to prominent sacred places² have been practised for many centuries. To date, they are widely being practised by major religions in South Asia. While pilgrimage on-foot and by transportation are on the ladder of the climb, virtual pilgrimages too, aided by the stretch of internet, are emerging as yet another form of pilgrimage. Also, pilgrims make pilgrimages to sacred centres of other faiths in addition to their own. All these forms of practices perhaps signify the important role pilgrimage has come to play in the lives of individual as well as communities.

Many authors have discussed experiences in connectivity and transformation- to be one of the key roles of pilgrimage. To cite a few, on connectivity, Victor Turner has said *communitas* in a manner of bonding an important experience of pilgrimage³ and Rana B. Singh has expressed relationality between divinity and humanity as a motivating experience.⁴ On transformation, Alan Morinis has highlighted transformation as underlying in all the experiences of pilgrimage.⁵ Similarly, Herald Skar has highlighted transformation as key dimension of pilgrimage and Rene Gothoni quotes this from Skar who produces his own field experience, “We had gone from a sedentary situation into a nomadic one, and inwardly we were beginning to feel a transformation of spirits and personality.”⁶

A question that could arise here is what kind of impact these experiences play among various human communities, and how do this relationality and transformation get translated into healthy, harmonious interreligious living? It is in this context, this seminar attempts to explore the aspects of interreligious understanding and harmony from the perspective of social capital theory of ‘bonding and bridging’ expressed by Robert Putnam.⁷

¹ Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2012).

² This includes places of rivers, forests, scene of natural beauty, mythological significances

³ See: Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

⁴ See: ⁴ Rana Singh says that it is a search for wholeness and it is a guiding force for unifying divinity and humanity . Rana P. B. Singh, “Pilgrimage in Hinduism: Historical Context and Modern Perspectives”, *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, Etd. Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Oslen (London: Routledge, 2006), 221.

⁵ Alan E. Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁶ See: Rene Gothoni, “Pilgrimage =Transformation Journey”, *The Problem of Ritual in Tohr Ahlback Ed. <http://www.doria.fi>*, accessed on 24.04.2017 (Finland: The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History Abo:1993) 107.

⁷ Social capital according to Robert D. Putnam, refers to “features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefits“(2). In this social trust and civic engagements

According to Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, some social capital consists of bonding or interconnectedness, which connects with people of common background while other social capital consists of bridging which connects with people of different background. “While both bonding and bridging each serve important purposes, bridging is vital for the smooth functioning of a diverse society.”⁸ Further, they say that the religious bridging will “foster greater interreligious acceptance.”⁹

Studies on pilgrimage show that strong ideological underpinnings with fundamental and communalistic incline, as Vasudha Narayanan,¹⁰ Bryan Pfaffenberger,¹¹ and Peter B. Anderson¹² argue, tend to foreground ‘bonding’ identities, straining the possibility of relationality and interreligious harmony. This way, religious identities are seen to be problematic.

On the contrary, organised¹³ and voluntary-interfaith pilgrimages¹⁴ are shown to promote relationality and bridging identities, as Sarah Thorley¹⁵, Francis X. Clooney,¹⁶ and others highlight, which show a character of openness to the other - to learn and relate- laying thus the road for harmonious co-existence and harmony, which is necessary in a country like India which has multi-religious identities.

are correlated. “the greater the density of associational membership in a society, the more trusting its citizen.” (8): Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital*, <http://archive.realtor.org>, accessed 17.04.2017.

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 536.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, “*American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites us*, 538. In some cases, common background is identified with homogeneous group and different background with heterogeneous group. While the former is said to contribute to health, education etc and the latter is said to help reduce social tension and interreligious disharmony: see <http://hbanaszak.mjr.uw.edu>, accessed on 12.04.2017.

¹⁰ He highlights how politicisation of rituals can make a sacred territory also a contested territory. Vasudha Narayanan. “Sacred Land, Common Ground, Contested Territory: the Healing Mother of Velankanni Basilica and the Infant Jesus Shrine in Bangalore.” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Vol. 17 (March, 2013):20-32. Accessed on 1.10.2015, available at <http://dx.doi.org>.

¹¹ He refers to the annual pilgrimage practice at Katragama in which an intersection of major traditions- Hinduism and Buddhism, and other traditions participate. He argues that at a superficial level, everyone seems to be well-knitted without any problem, but a deeper level of enquiry shows that there is contrasting views and motives maintaining the social divide. Bryan Pfaffenberger, “The Katragama Pilgrimage: Hindu-Buddhist Interactions and its Significance in Sri Lanka’s Polyethnic Social System,” *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. XXXVIII. No .2 (1979): 253.

¹² In a comparative analysis, he highlights the varying degree of openness, and its corresponding effect as regards bridging and bonding aspect of pilgrimage. Peter B. Anderson, “Processions and Chariot Festival in Tharmgambadi and Velankanni: Cultural Encounters and Marking,” *Review of Development and Change*, Vol. XV, No 1&2 (2009): 271-288.

¹³ Pilgrimages are organised with the aim to foster interreligious understanding and harmony. Refer to a popular inter-faith activity- a walk round places of worship , organised jointly by Bishop’s committee for Interreligious Dialogue and Ignatian spirituality, accessed 1.4.2017.

¹⁴ Individuals on their own or with familiar groups make pilgrimage to sacred places other than one’s own.

¹⁵ She points out to an organised inter-faith pilgrimage endeavour about which pilgrims share their experience in which they show openness to learn from others, from their rooted identity. Sarah Thorley, *Traditions of Spiritual Guidance, Interfaith Pilgrimage: Journeys across Boundaries*, 187. Also, refer to a popular inter-faith activity- a walk around places of worship, organised jointly by Bishop’s committee for Interreligious Dialogue and Ignatian spirituality, accessed 1.4.2017.

¹⁶ He highlights the experience of Abishktnada, who experienced deeply the grace of Arunachala, ,almost a longing to cross over from his rooted identity. Francis Clooney, “On the Holiness of Holy places: Some Reflections on the Inter-religious Possibility and Problem,” in *Shrines and Pilgrimages: Philosophy and Practice*, Lawrence S. Fernandes Editor (Chennai: Vijay Nicole Imprints Private Limited, 2016): 9-12. This shows that interreligious pilgrimages, in some ways, contribute to openness to the other, reducing the possibility of friction and misunderstanding.

In the light of the above discussion, this seminar seeks to explore the ‘lived-in experiences’ of the two-fold dynamics of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’, especially in relation to Indian pilgrimages with an enquiry- are they promoting bonding of traditional ascriptive identities or a relational identity, or are they encouraging a closure and enclosure of identities, or are they setting in motion religious conflict or harmony? Do they in anyway engage with Indian specific issues like caste, linguistic divisions, regional differences, social discriminations, etc.?

The seminar welcomes presentations, based on researches, on the different facets of the conference theme. Some of them could be the following:

‘Bonding and Bridging’ and Interreligious harmony

‘Bonding and Bridging’: Caste

‘Bonding and Bridging’: Social Discriminations

Authority: ‘Bonding and Bridging’

Business and Social Trust: Sacred places

Patriarchy, ‘Bonding and Bridging’

Pilgrimage and Politics: Social Trust

Pilgrimage and social Trust

Pilgrimage: Social Trust and the People in villages and towns on the journey

Pilgrimages and ascriptive identities

Pilgrimages and inter-religious experiences

Pilgrimages and spiritual experiences

Social Trust: Regional, linguistic differences

Call for Papers

A brief proposal not exceeding 300 words needs to reach ulagaraja@yahoo.com or xtianstudies@gmail.com on or before **31 July 2017**. Result on selected papers will be made known by **05 August 2017**. Selected paper presenters need to send in their final **paper by 20 October 2017**.

Papers with critical insights, reflection and arguments will be published in peer reviewed journals post-seminar.

Proposed Dates of Seminar: 26-27, October 2017

Registration Fee and Accommodation

Paper presenters and participants are requested to take care of their travel and accommodation. Lunch will be provided on the first and second day along with a conference dinner on the evening of the first day.

Registration fee

Foreign paper presenter / participant: US\$ 200

Indian paper presenter / participant: Rs.1000

For further details, contact:

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