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Cover Page Footnote

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Kumbh Mela is the world's largest pilgrimage gathering on the shores of the River Ganges. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) trialectics of space framework, this paper interrogates the spatial dynamics of the Kumbh Mela through the spatial meanings espoused by local and international pilgrims. Accounting for dominant discourses that frame the event as occurring in and around a sacred waterscape, five focus groups with pilgrims were conducted at the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, India. The findings indicate that local pilgrims were aware of river pollution, but they used discursive strategies to decouple this material fact from their lived spiritual experiences; from this vantage point the sacred was believed to be insulated from the secular. International pilgrims' perceptions significantly differed, from those of their local counterparts, in that the sacred waterscape was seen as polluted and the onus was on them to remedy what they believed locals had neglected to do; for this group cleaning the River was a sacred act. The findings indicate that despite the existence of dominant spatial conceptualisations of a sacred waterscape, through use of the space, new and often competing spatial meanings arise that illuminate our understanding of the human condition and the social relations therewithin.

Key Words: Kumbh Mela; pilgrimage; Ganges; sacred waterscapes; trialectics of space; India

Introduction

This paper interrogates the spatial practices of locals and foreigners attending the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage on the Ganges River shores in India. Our focus is the nexus between how spaces are signified and how they are ultimately utilised by various constituents. Place and space have been extensively discussed within the geographical study of tourism. Tourism scholarship has addressed the nexus between the physical, the social and the conceptual dimensions of space (see Buzinde & Manuel-Navarrete 2013). However, the spiritual dimension of space has received scant attention within tourism studies and yet it has the potential to augment knowledge on the intricacies of place-based meanings that religious and spiritual adherents ascribe to certain locales as well as the uses they adopt whilst in those

venues. Spatial representations of place have increasingly been problematised by scholars, especially after Foucault (1986) and Lefebvre (1991) questioned the definition of absolute space, in terms of Euclidean geometry, and claimed that regions are socially constructed (see Manuel-Navarrete & Redclift 2010). Recent scholarship on place has emphasised the meaning-making dimension of tourism spatiality and it has also highlighted notions of place as fluid, changeable, and characterised by dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory (see Stokowski, 2002).

Anthropologists and comparative religious scholars have thoroughly researched the notion of spirituality as it relates to place and many have focused on the river Ganges, as well as the relationship between sacred purity and water pollution (Alley, 2002; Haberman, 2006). For

instance, Alley's (2000) research examines religious leaders' perceptions of whether material pollution affects the sacred purity of the river. Her findings indicate that religious leaders

refrained from mixing what they saw as two unrelated subjects: the river's transcendental purity and the disintegration of the tangible or temporal world (represented here by 'environmental pollution') (Alley, 2000:371).

The aforementioned scholars have extensively shared accounts of the dissonance, or lack thereof, between different perceptions of sacred waterscapes in India. Absent within the above-mentioned prolegomena are the roles of tourism and tourists in creating dominant spatial discourses and influencing social agents' use of sacred waterscapes.

The body of work on religious and spiritual meanings often engages notions of place to the extent that they can be evoked to describe a locale (i.e., the River Ganges). However, relatively few studies on religious and spiritual tourism interrogate place as a spatial unit of analysis through which to comprehend meanings and uses of spatiality. Although not focused on the Ganges, one exception to the rule is Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner's (2006) study, which documents the spatial dynamics of pilgrimage spaces to understand how they are organised, signified and utilised. The authors focus on

the historical development of the Bahai Gardens in Haifa, Israel, the tourism board's promotion of the site as Haifa's primary tourist designation, and the distinct spatial practices that have been used by both constituencies (Gatrell & Collins-Kreiner, 2006:765)

to understand the spatial practices associated with the site. Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner's (2006) study draws on the triadic model of spatial production, which is vital to understanding social relations in any context (Soja, 1995).

Informed by Lefebvre's (1991) seminal scholarship, the triadic model of spatial production advances knowledge regarding the production and consumption of tourism space (Manuel-Navarrete & Redclift 2012). Lefebvre's work has been widely applied to various touristic and non-touristic landscape but few references have been made to pilgrimage spaces; with the exception of Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner's (2006) work. This omission may also be attributable to a limitation in Lefebvre's (1991)

work which is that he does not engage with religiosity / spirituality in his conceptualisations regardless of the relevance of these subject matters to his theoretical framework. The three pillars of the triad encompass, representations of spaces, spaces of representation and spatial practices.

Representations of Space (aka conceived space) refers to the ways in which space is signified by for instance, the government, technocrats (i.e., the media, the tourism authority), planners (Urry, 2000) who are determined how the space ought to be used. For instance, at Kumbh Mela the Indian government has worked with various technocrats to zone the river bed for its temporary pilgrimage use. The following quote captures this vantage point:

...to make Kumbh an event of unparalleled grandeur; the Government of Uttar Pradesh has undertaken multiple measures for ensuring the efficient running of the Mela...Construction of flyovers, railway under bridges, road widening in the city and beautification of major intersections are few highlights of the massive construction and upgradation tasks (Government of India, 2019).

Spaces of Representation (aka lived space) refers to the spaces that social agents use; these locales can also be seen as 'dominated spaces' which social agents attempt to alter and appropriate by countering the dominant discourse of the space (Lefebvre, 1991). For example, as will be illustrated in this study, the Kumbh Mela space is perceived differently by local and international pilgrims.

Spatial Practices refer to human routines as well as the physical objects, like built structures that facilitate the production of space for human use (Shields, 1991). For instance, spatial practices at the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage result in the conversion of the Ganges River bed into a mega tent city, with certain spaces divided based on religious and secular, tourists and locals, commercial and temporary residential purposes.

This paper draws on the theoretical framework of the triadic model of spatial production to inform the goal of this study which is to interrogate the nexus between the signification and use of pilgrimage sites, specifically the pilgrimage site on which Kumbh Mela pilgrimage is held. This study focuses on the interconnection between

spaces of representation and representations of space within a pilgrimage location. An interpretive paradigm is adopted to interview, via focus groups, local and foreign pilgrims attending the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage at the River Ganges

Pilgrimage sites affiliated with Hinduism in India are often biophysical environments located besides rivers or atop mountains (Budruk, 2014; Feldhaus, 1995; Ruback, Kohli & Pandey, 2009). This phenomenon is not unique to Hinduism as many other religious and spiritual denominations venerate select natural landscapes (Allison 2015; Frascaroli, 2013). Drawing on legends in ancient Hindu scriptures, such as the *Rig Veda* and the *Vishnu Purana*, Hindu pilgrims and residents consider some of the aforementioned environments sacred and capable of granting boons and intermediating in the affairs of the afterlife (Alley, 1998). For instance, for some, the River Ganges/Ganga in India is considered a goddess, the fluid embodiment of transcendence (Eck, 1982). Every twelve years, the world renowned Kumbh Mela pilgrimage celebrates the confluence of nature and humanity through corporeal contact with the River Ganges. Over millennia, Hinduism and allied creeds have associated this biophysical waterscape with the spiritual powers of purification and healing, but increasingly new comers, as is evidenced by the growing numbers of international travelers, about 70 million in 2013, join the event (Tharoor, 2013; Uttar Pradesh Tourism, 2017).

The process of touristification is just one of the many ways in which Western globalisation ‘infiltrates’ (*i.e.*, gains access gradually and surreptitiously) this event (Maclean, 2009). As thoroughly studied by Maclean (2008), British colonial authorities sought to regulate and control the festival to hinder its sedition potential. European colonisers infiltrated it by providing material infrastructure, and enforcing norms and codes to regulate bathing and hygienic practice in order to allegedly prevent the spread of disease. They also employed legal and *semantic* strategies to re-signify the river as a water resource rather than a deity (Alley, 2002).

As a river, the Ganges is not only characterised by its transcendental powers but also its hydraulic infrastructure, which provides water to almost 10% of the world’s population; it is intensely subjected to irrigation, urban consumption and wastewater discharge (Matta & Kumar, 2015). It is on this spatial backdrop that the

largest pilgrimage, the Kumbh Mela, is held; a spatiality on which the planes of matter and subjective spiritual experience intersect. Pilgrimage in Sanskrit (an ancient Indo-European language of India) is referred to as *tirtha-yatra*, which literally means: ‘journey to river fords’ (Bhardwaj, 1983). The *tirtha-yatra* is believed to provide Hindu pilgrims (*tirtha-yatrees*) self-transformation (Singh, 2006). Mediated by religious belief systems, some adherents believe that their mere presence in these spaces is transformative; they believe the River can grant them reprieve from ordinary ailments and struggles and allow them to partake in an esoteric experience of peace, harmony, and spirituality (see Buzinde, Kalavar, Kohli & Manuel-Navarrete, 2014; Kalavar, Buzinde, Manuel-Navarrete and Kohli 2015). From this vantage point, the Kumbh Mela bridges the planes of *matter* and *ethereal* subjective experiences of place.

Methods

This study draws on an interpretive paradigm to understand the intersection between people and place within the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage. The first part draws on a content analysis of archival materials to understand representations of space or space as conceived by various technocrats. The focus in this case is on narratives featured on the official government website for the Kumbh and discourses on various local tour companies Kumbh tours. The second part of the study draws on focus group interviews to interrogate the uses and interpretations of space from the perspective of locals and internationals attending the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage, which took place in Allahabad, India on the shores of the River Ganges. Focus groups were used because they allow for elicitation of opinions, perceptions and experiences in an interactional milieu and they have been extensively deployed within mass pilgrimage settings (see Mehta, 1997). Five focus groups, each comprising 10 to 15 participants, were conducted with members residing in five different ashrams (spiritual settlements). Four of the focus groups comprised resident Indians while one focus group was made up of foreign nationals (Americans, Canadians, Brazilians, French and Germans). The duration of the focus groups ranged from one to two hours. Within the focus groups, consensus was achieved by asking participants to voice their opinion about a particular question posed or issue discussed. Discussions were carried out in Hindi or English and in some cases Sanskrit.

The questions posed included: *What activities are you engaging in while here on the pilgrimage grounds? How would you describe the environmental state of the River Ganges?* Under the supervision of four faculty members, the research questions and transcripts were translated, back translated and coded by four graduate students proficient in English and Hindi. This study is part of a larger international and interdisciplinary project that examines: the influence of spirituality on social cohesion; the role of intergenerational knowledge transference in influencing pilgrimage attendance; and, the influence of spirituality and devotion on perceptions of health and healing. Given the interpretive paradigm adopted in this study, the findings have limited generalisability and cannot be extrapolated to the larger population. Two distinct American universities provided research approval for this study (IRB # 1301008696 and IRB # 41899); additionally, research ethics clearance was sought and awarded by an Indian university (Department of Psychology).

The Kumbh Mela Pilgrimage as Conceived Space

Archival data drawn upon in this section highlight the notion of conceived space. There is also the added nuance of temporality that has to be accounted for because space in which the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage is held is under water for the most of the year with the exception of the approximately one-and-a-half-month period during which the Mela is held. The entire receded river plain, is thus temporarily re-purposed as a pilgrimage site for millions of attendees. The Kumbh Mela spatial layout has been examined by a group of interdisciplinary Harvard scholars who describe the spatiality as a locale where

multiple aspects of contemporary urbanism come to fruition, including spatial zoning, an electricity grid, food and water distribution, physical infrastructure construction, mass vaccinations, public gathering spaces, and nighttime social events (Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2013, online).

In 2013, the event hosted 80million people

inhabiting tents of one kind or another, traveling on specially constructed roads, using the electrical power and illumination generated from 22,000 temporary light poles (Harvard Business School, 2013, online).

The Indian government appoints a variety of government officials who are responsible for policing, sanitation,

zoning, public health and immigration of the premises. For instance, from a public health perspective there is a first responder station to cater to all the health needs of pilgrims and these include Western and Eastern medicine. Another example from a sanitation vantage point are the numerous facilities erected on the river bed to ensure pilgrims have access to toilets (*i.e.*, roadside urinals, zero discharge toilets and eco-friendly bio toilets). According to Cheng (2013)

the majority of the water used for drinking and cooking at the Kumbh is from ground water that is pumped daily through tube wells that are 350 meters deep and then treated with chlorine. There are a total of 46 tube wells and 600 km of pipeline throughout the Kumbh Mela site. The system has a capacity to pump 92 million liters per day of water during peak bathing days. On a normal non-bathing day, 10 tube wells are open and pump approximately 2 million liters per day of water.

The Indian government launched a multi-lingual website to explicate efforts undertaken to develop the physical landscape and also to promote the event locally and internationally. Comments such as the following are featured:

The Kumbh Mela comprises of many rituals including bathing ritual, which by far is the most significant ritual performed at Kumbh. Millions of pilgrims take part in the Kumbh bathing ritual at the Triveni Sangam ... To facilitate tourists, a city of 4,200 premium tents is being established ... Convention halls are being built across the mela area ... Some of the innovative new attractions at Kumbh will include theme-based Gates, Laser Shows, Paint My City Campaign and Heli-tourism (<http://kumbh.gov.in/en/>).

The juxtaposition between the sacred and the secular in the last statement is of interest as we consider the spatial dynamics of pilgrimage locations and the meanings associated with these spaces. Notably, the touristic themed locations were strategically placed on the outskirts of the pilgrimage grounds, by so doing ‘buffering’ the sacred waterscape. The local tour companies offering Kumbh tours featured messages about the pilgrimage similar to that of the Indian government. The sacred waterscape and corporeal linkages to it were often highlighted as is indicated in the excerpts below:

... Explore the auspicious Mela ... Be there during the most exciting time, the main bathing dates! The Kumbh Mela is the most significant pilgrimage for Hindu followers. People from all faiths and belief doctrines journey to the Kumbh Mela from all over the world. The Kumbh Mela has universal meaning for all who attend (<https://originalworld.com/grouptour/kumbh-mela-tour/>).

Kumbh Mela, a tour of salvation invites a large gathering from across the world to become free from the cycle of death & birth ... [it] is held at the meeting of three rivers: holy Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati. All devotees come to take the dip in Holy River for purification of soul. It is the life changing experience and person feel the peace of mind (<http://www.indiantravelconsultants.com/divine-tours-1.php>).

State Express offers special tour packages during Haridwar Kumbh Mela on special bathing dates which are specially designed for this great event ... A dip in Ganges at ... the time of Kumbh Mela is believed to attain moksha from vicious cycle of birth and rebirth (<https://www.stateexpressindia.com/kumbh-mela/>).

Kumbha Mela, the most revered Hindu religious congregation of the country sees massive gatherings for a dip in the Holy Ganga. This pilgrimage, known to wash away all the sins ... Begin the day with a boat ride on the Holy Ganga river, to unfold the miracles of nature. Witness the daily life of the locals ... while the temples begin the chanting of slokas and rituals ... the Kumbh Mela recently marked its place on the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (<http://www.kumbhmelatour.com/tour-planner/haridwar/classical-north-india-tour-with-kumbh-mela.html>).

The waterscape is thus discursively captured with reverence and is described as embodying sacredness. All the excerpts allude to the magnitude of past attendance as well as the absence of a comparative pilgrimage event in terms of number of attendees. The prominence of the event is also often substantiated through accounts of international recognition of the event as evidenced by the recent UNESCO accreditation of the Kumbh Mela. A question of enduring interest, however, is how

the aforementioned spatial narratives of the sacred waterscape are perceived by social agents who navigate the space during the pilgrimage; the subsequent section discusses their emergent spatial meanings.

The Kumbh Mela Pilgrimage as Lived Space

Focus group data shed light on the Kumbh Mela as a lived space (spaces of representation). Two main themes emerged that illustrate the varying meanings and uses of the space by locals and internationals: **Pilgrimage and Performativity** (descriptions of spiritual practices during the Kumbh Mela) and; **Narrativity of Pilgrimage Waterscapes** (perceptions about the river's sacredness and environmental pollution).

Pilgrimage and Performativity

This section presents findings pertaining to the practices and activities that participants engaged in at the pilgrimage site. For local Indian pilgrims, bathing in the river is clearly an important, concrete and often cited ritual of purification of one's physical, mental and spiritual dimensions; it is regarded as an opportunity for the removal of sins and misfortune and an occasion for the bequeathing of blessings. Bathing in the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela is considered particularly auspicious by locals. This is because adherents believe there is an astrological convergence during the pilgrimage which accentuates the power of the 'amrit, or the nectar of immortality that is believed to be present in the waters' and has the ability to absolve one of sin (Maclean, 2009:320). Participants often used the Sanskrit word *Ganga* when making reference to the river or more reverent terms such as *Gangaji* and *Gangajal*. The pilgrimage space is generally regarded as a sacred landscape, but activities undertaken on the terrestrial part of the space are distinguished from those undertaken in the waterscape. Generally, local pilgrimage performances include, as indicated in the excerpts below, corporeal contact with the River:

I take a holy dip in Ganga and visit or meet great Sadhu and Saints.

I meet different saints and do Satsang (spiritual discourse) and then take a holy dip.

Firstly, I take a dip in Ganga, and then do prayer, meditation and try to understand myself. After that I go to other ashram to obtain news and information of God. Here we do research on God.

I worship Ganga and do Pind Daan for our ancestors and take a holy dip in Ganga daily.

First, we attend Satsang and Pravachan (Religious discourse) then go to attend Yagya and take holy dip in Ganga (Ganga Snan) and we get so much energy that helps us to resolve daily life conflicts.

I think holy dip in the Sangam is something divine so I do this every day.

Firstly, I do Prabghu-esmaran (remembering to God) then I take a holy dip in Ganga and do some charity. After coming back to ashram, I do Yajna and Worship. After that I do my prayers and mantra chanting and then I go for Satsang and Pavachan (Religious discourse) and then I do my evening prayers. At last, I do again mantra chanting and Prabghu-esmaran (remembering to God).

As indicated in the above comments, particularly the use of the phrase ‘holy dip’, bodily contact with the river is regarded as a divine activity. This finding is aligned with statements in the literature that speak to a level geopiety associated with certain biophysical sites in India, particularly the River Ganges (see Knowles, 1992). The rituals of purification vary. For some participants there is no specific order of activities that have to be followed while for others, as indicated in the comments above, a particular self-imposed sequence govern their daily activities at the pilgrimage site. An important finding is that daily activities are unstructured for locals and often facilitated by bodily contact with the River Ganges. Most other activities are introspective and related to strengthening one’s own relationship with the divine (i.e., silent prayer or serving the poor as a practice of philanthropy).

In comparison to their local counterparts, corporeal immersion in the River is not as popular an activity for international attendees of the Kumbh Mela. In fact, international pilgrims’ activity revolves more around structured activity which generally entails listening to talks delivered by one of the English-speaking gurus, engaging in yoga and meditation. Philanthropic efforts are also undertaken but unlike the locals who are focused on feeding the poor, international pilgrims’ charitable work entails environmental activism. The excerpts below show the range in performativity engaged in by international pilgrims:

Firstly, for me we have Pravachan or Satsang (Religious discourse) with Prem Baba

We do lots of bhakti Yoga. We clean Ganga and meditate.

Firstly we do Sadhna (Meditation) here, secondly receiving teachings from master (baba). Then go to experience ancient rituals of India such as visiting naga babas (naked yogis) and different saints to gain a better understanding of India.

I do Yoga then go to take a holy dip in Ganga. I think the most important thing at least for me is to do nothing, stop everything, have no obligations. Here I have some space to be myself.

We do Satsang, meditation and listen Baba.

... mantra chanting is very strong activity that I do here and meeting with naga babas.

There were numerous accounts about gaining a better understanding of India, do nothing, or having no obligations, all of which arguably evoke experiences typically associated with Western-style tourists. The international participants were residing at an Ashram headed by Swami Chidanand Saraswati, the head of the Parmarth Niketan Ashram and leader of the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance (GIWA), established in 2013 in partnership with UNICEF and co-sponsorer by USAID and the Netherlands. Swami Chidanand Saraswati founded the NGO Ganga Action Parivar (GAP) which launched a global movement of water and spirituality. During the 2013 Kumbh Mela, GAP conducted a march and an educational campaign to raise awareness about water pollution, including a trash collection action (Kedzior, 2014). This ashram also hosted Sri Prem Baba, a Brazilian-born spiritual master. So generally, internationals at this ashram engage with the river for clean-up and shore-based prayers and thus water immersive engagements are limited. Interestingly, Swami Chidanand Saraswati also has an Ashram at the Kumbh for locals, which is where the researchers of this study resided; accounts from pilgrims at the ashram for locals were similar to those of the locals described earlier.

Narrativity of Pilgrimage Waterscapes

Having established an understanding related to the activities that pilgrims were engaged in, participants were then asked about their perceptions of the waterscape. In particular, one of the most salient

discussions revolved around the environmental state of the river. The perceptions held by locals differed from those held by internationals, particularly on the element of water pollution which at the time of the interviews had dominated media discourses. Through probing techniques participants were asked whether they believed the river was polluted. The responses are illustrative of the competing meanings related to lived space and the various ways groups appropriate space and related meanings.

Locals were adamant in their assessment that the River was incorruptible in its purity and sacredness, as is indicated in the comments below:

Absolutely not, its (the river) water does not get soiled or dirty.

Ganga jal can never get polluted or get germs. No, there are no reasons for this to be the case.

Ganga jal is not dirty or impure, it is our thinking that is dirty.

In fact, associating the word pollution with the Ganges was abhorrent to some local participant who vehemently defended the sanctity of the river. Notably, the longer participants spoke, the more it became evident that they were cognisant of some negative environmental influences on the river but they concurrently argued that sacred practices and performances, such as prayer and burning incense, functioned to cleanse the river. The excerpts below are exemplary of these sentiments:

No, Gangaji is not polluted. If anything, it helps to purify the environment. Additionally, many people here do Yajna every day and the smoke from the Yajna further purifies the environment including the river.

No, Ganga is not polluted because mantra chanting especially chanting the OM mantra creates clean, good non polluted environment.

Here we blow Shankh and sound of Sankh removes the sins. Smoke of Yajna also removes sins and clarifies the environment.

No, it appears dirty and polluted outside but it is pure inside.

The last participant's comment is a foundational perception held by many participants. That is, participants believed the river is comprised of two dimensions, a biophysical dimension that showcases 'dirt' and an ethereal dimension that they believe could not

conceivably be impacted by any human-led action. Thus, accounts of the religious practices and performances aiding in the cleansing of the soul were often made in reference to the biophysical dimension of the river. Cognisance of polluting elements was an indication that participants were not oblivious to the role of human instigated actions in polluting the river. However, they were steadfast in their belief that the divine aspect of the river, no matter how polluted the river was, remained intact. Such a discourse is not simply indicative of a form of geopiety but most importantly it affirms participants' boundary-making strategies to discursively protect their spiritual practices from the effluents of a modernising country. Additionally, participants' belief that the river has the divine ability to wash away one's lifetime of sins gives further credence to claims that the river also has the ability to cleanse itself of all other foreign elements. After all, the river is regarded as a nurturing Mother ('Ma Ganga') and the physical representation of the divine.

As though to prove their assertions, participants spoke of the billions who for decades have had the opportunity to bathe in the Ganges seeking absolution and yet the river still exists and remains unaffected. These statements are pre-emptively accompanied by claims that religious practices and performances (e.g., offerings placed in the water) that occur on the riverbanks and / or in the water have no detrimental impact on the river. Blame, however, is often attributed to lackadaisical government regulations that participants believe fail to control industries that utilise the river as a dumping site. Some illustrative statements are as follows:

Of course, taking bath is not a problem at all but industries and government is responsible for present condition. Industries are throwing their waste into the river and secondly government is also throwing city's wastages and sanitary lines. That is the cause of pollution and damage. Now our next generation is getting concern about it but government is not even ready to hear these problems.

[T]aking bath is not a problem, main thing that flow of Ganga-ji is reduced due to many hydro projects, you can see in Uttranchal, there are many project and dams are working; they disturb the flow of Ganga. Second thing is sewage from the cities is also going to our rivers so this is a real cause. Taking bath is not a problem. Government negative attitude toward these problems is a matter of concern.

[S]elfish people with impure thoughts are destroying the purity of Ganga, you can see Ganga jal is getting worse because of pollution of factory and due to negligence of government. There are departments for this but they do nothing. Ganga-jal can correct our mess.

... lack of proper government policies is the cause of impurity of Ganga. Ganga itself is pure.

Some participants blame other forms of human interventions that involve redirecting or restricting the flow of the river. Additional examples include:

Ganga is very pure but we are destroying its purity, we are not allowing it to flow naturally, if we let it flow naturally Ganga will never get polluted.

Ganga begins from Gomukh (origin place of Ganga) Utrakhand, there is a dam named Tihari, it is big cause of environmental problems of Ganga.

Generally, culpability is directed to 'other', in this case the government. In instances where blame is directed towards a semblance of self it is in reference to the general human population and its propensity to entertain what many participants characterised as impure thoughts:

It is our immoral thinking that pollutes Ganga so we ... have to clean these thoughts by bathing in Ganga.

People's impure thoughts affect Ganga but prayer can clean this.

The culpable human being, characterised in the above comments, engages in a mental act, which, according to participants, has no bearing on the essence of the river. The reverse does not hold true because participants believe the river has a divine influence on the human being and an immense ability to absolve and cleanse away a myriad of mental and physical impurities.

Unlike the local participants, international pilgrims unabatedly engage with river pollution related matters and they point to religious activities as dimensions that exacerbate the situation. In identifying the culprit(s) they exclude themselves and rather frame local residents and organisation as the key perpetrators, as indicated in the following excerpts:

I do not think that bathing has any bad impact but you know when millions are gathering and there are no proper toilets and then all this waste is going to the river. Absolutely, it is quite sad because people are using [the River] ... even Indians, are also spreading waste.

Bath involves bringing images and lighting candles and bringing flowers and all of this, for me it has impact.

Ecologically speaking because I am a biologist, I see that this segment also create a change in the water, second the fish and animals get scared and also the edges of river get disturbed ... If thousands of people bathing every day, it causes harm.

The problem is not the religious belief. If they have enough money, good school and education, they will not bring things that could harm the river. They will just come and bathe.

Preponderance on pollution related issues may be attributable to international participants' involvement in GAP's educational campaign to keep the River Ganges pollution-free (Sharda 2013); a significant part of this involvement consists of collecting trash accumulated at the river shores. Nevertheless, it is significant that no participants mentioned other types of pollution perhaps due to lack of broader situated knowledge. International participants also did not engage the issue of the River's purification power, as discussed by local participants.

Discussion

By claiming that the river Ganges is not polluted, local pilgrims starkly dissociated the biophysical and spiritual planes, despite keeping them in perfect union in their descriptions of religious worshipping. This finding resonates with Alley's (2002) research on perceptions of the Ganges, in Banaras, held by Hindu priests who view the River Ganges as characterised by harmony between the sacred and the material in which running water embodies spiritual purification. Notably, it can be argued that the conceived space also adheres to a similar ideology in that the secular aspects of the event are strategically placed on the outskirts with a boundary around the sacred waterscape. Regardless of origin, participants in the current study demonstrate admiration for the topography and material substance of the river and they respect it for its capacity to evoke the divine. Local participants' comments indicate that they can access the River's

divine powers from the biophysical plane, through bodily contact with the water. Consequently, protection of the River's transcendental functions requires segregating them from the entire phenomenon of pollution. This is accomplished through participants' creation of discursive boundaries that ignore the impact of, for instance, the hydro projects. In essence, spatial boundaries, whether created or perceived are the mechanism through which spatiality is coded and decoded.

It is important to note that although the current focus groups with local pilgrims showcase firm commitment with boundary work, other studies have found evidence of defection and the limits of discursive strategies of dissociation. For instance, Haberman's (2006:176-177) fieldwork and textual analysis of the discursive practices of devotees involved in environmentalism revealed that they believe and publicly declare that if conditions keep deteriorating, the River's divine powers will cease to exist. Kedzior (2014) interviewed Indian environmentalists and water users in the cities of Kanpur, Allahabad and Varanasi in 2009 and found that pilgrims experience increasing difficulties denying pollution because of visual evidence of drains emptying black sludge into the river, and getting rashes after bathing are becoming habitual. This author concluded that belief in the River's power is not only eroded by accumulating pollution, but also by broader debates surrounding its abatement. She also found evidence of 'defection' amongst non-environmentalist devotees. For instance, a serviceman in Allahabad acknowledged that the waterbody was 'a pure river, but no longer. Its spiritual power is no more' (as cited in Kedzior 2014:40). It should be noted that institutional efforts undertaken after 2009 to concretise government involvement in the Kumbh and the national narrative about the event may explicate the differences in pilgrims' perceptions as captured in the current study when juxtaposed with Kedzior's (2014) work.

Local pilgrims' association of industries, governments, and dams with for instance 'immoral thinking' suggests that, as long as the River preserves her purifying powers, spiritual practices can potentially become an effective way of dealing with the root-causes of water pollution. From this vantage point, water pollution is regarded by local pilgrims as both cause and consequence of the mass population's disregard for nurturing the River that purifies and sustains life. That is, local pilgrims see the River's purity as part of a more holistic process of cosmic order and balance; an order in which humans strive to live

harmoniously (Alley, 2011:39). International pilgrims provide evidence of slightly different boundary-work, in comparison to their local counterparts, in part because bathing in the River is not as crucial for them. For them the landscapes on the river shore where yoga, meditation and scholarly exchanges with gurus take place, are the spaces of reverence / sacredness. The waterscape symbolises for this group what they come to clean / restore. Thus, corporeality here in reference to spatiality, is invoked differently by foreigners and locals. Bodily contact with the River for the former facilitates the sacred act of cleaning, whilst for the latter cleanses self; both however, have an ulterior goal of helping humanity through their individual actions.

The findings highlight the spatial dynamics of the pilgrimage event and demonstrate the fact that dominant conceptualisations of given space are always open to various uses and interpretations by social agents. Perhaps the technocrats in this case are aware that some incongruence exists in the dominant codes and symbolisms between locals and the international camps; hence the spatial separation of the local residential areas from those of foreigners. If this is indeed the case, then one can argue that technocrats do not account for the spaces of mutual encounter between local and internationals and the emergent discordant symbolisms within.

Conclusion

Through *representations of space*, we interrogate how space is created; that is, how technocrats deploy a system of signs that encode spatial meanings. Through the creation of spatial designs and promotional material for the pilgrimage event, the space is conceived of *a priori*, and in this case over a very short period of time. The encodings of the conceived space, which are created through structured institutions of knowledge, provide guidance on the type of pilgrimage space and the purpose of its creation. The Kumbh Mela space is designed in a way that orients activity towards the shoreline of the sacred river with the principal goal of accommodating millions of pilgrims in the religious festival. The findings of this study illustrate how *spaces of representation* showcase the unstructured and situated meanings associated with the pilgrimage venue. Otherwise put, the manner in which the pilgrimage space is experienced but also the ways in which social agents change and appropriate the associated spatial meanings. For instance, the international pilgrims interviewed in this study describe

an alternative waterscape and one which is affected by pollution. By contrast, the local pilgrims interviewed for this study were reluctant to describe the space as tainted by pollution as doing so would force them to render their entire pilgrimage obsolete. They consequently argue that an inner core of the waterscape has the power to retain its sacredness regardless of the levels of pollution.

The main contribution of this paper is the interrogation of symbolic meanings associated with the pilgrimage space and the showcasing of many ways in which the 'ordered' space, encoded by technocrats, is decoded, used and reproduced by social agents. Having been awarded UNESCO status, the Kumbh Mela's national prominence has been recently elevated to a global platform (UNESCO, 2017). Thus, questions of enduring interest for future research on the Kumbh Mela are whether UNESCO status aids or thwarts the institutionalised conception of space and how social agents will varyingly continue to interact within this waterscape.

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