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Conflicts and connections in the landscape of the Manimahesh pilgrimage

Abstract

There is a significant, established, record of academic discussion of Himalayan pilgrimages, which when taken together, direct understandings of pilgrimage in this region in a way that draws attention to some aspects of the landscape of Himalayan pilgrimage while ignoring others. This paper seeks to add something new to the ever-expanding literature on pilgrimage in this region by disrupting this process through the presentation of a collaborative auto-ethnography, which focuses on the landscape of a locally important, yet hitherto internationally ignored, Himalayan pilgrimage: the Manimahesh pilgrimage of the Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh. It emerges that, while fellow pilgrims mutually constitute each other's pilgrimage experience, the exact nature of that experience varies depending on the pilgrim's skill to reckon with the environment that they are entering into. What is more, the conflicting nature of pilgrimage experiences becomes intensified after the pilgrimage during the pilgrims' structured attempts to narrativise their experience for others.

Key words:

Himalayan pilgrimage; anthropology; Hinduism; landscape theory; India

Introduction

In early September 2009 we were at our neighbour's house in Shimla, the state capital of Himachal Pradesh. Although outside our window the treetops swayed peacefully in the wind, inside the house there was an increasing air of frustration. We had just returned from a pilgrimage in the north of the Hill State and we were trying to relate the experience of this to our neighbour, who had been left lame when the bus she had been travelling on went off the road (sadly, a common occurrence in Himachal Pradesh). The ritual sharing of the pilgrimage experience is something that we have observed frequently in Himachal and to a lesser extent throughout India, and it is a performance that is often permeated with contradictions and mysteriously vague descriptions, of which neither of us had before fully understood the significance. However, now, as we struggled to narrativise the journey for those who had not been able to make it, we began to realise in a very personal way how the construction of landscapes through speech can be an unsatisfying and contested performance.

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As two people from quite different backgrounds (one a British, male, Christian; the other an Indian, female, Hindu) we clearly had at times conflicting visions of how to recreate the pilgrimage for our host and yet we were united in both falling silent when trying to express the ineffable. This betrayed the reality of shared experiences (forged on the pilgrimage trail) with which our smiling host could not connect. In trying to reconstruct a collective experience of the pilgrimage, we became acutely aware of the way that the moments of connection on the journey were undercut by other contesting experiences and understandings. This is, of course, a part of the wider debate in pilgrimage studies about the extent to which pilgrimage generates conflict and *communitas* (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). In this article, rather than engage with this debate in a classical way, we intend to show how, in our distinct experiences of the pilgrimage and the later retelling of the journey, issues of conflict and *communitas* can be folded into the experience of the reality of both physical and narrated pilgrimage landscapes.

What follows is part a collaborative, multivoiced, autoethnography (Davis & Elis, 2008, pp. 289-300; Gold & Gujar, 2002), part a traditional ethnographic account and part a critical engagement with classical theory, which may be termed analytical autoethnography (Anderson, 2006, p. 375). These diverse approaches have been carefully chosen to allow us to capture something of the dynamic nature of this pilgrimage at the same time as relating it to wider theory. Rather than seeing the competing approaches as jarring, we believe that they weave together into a complex melody that is reminiscent of the pilgrimage itself. That said, we do not believe that we have captured anything like the totality of the pilgrimage and accept that there is room for additional levels of insight to be added to our accounts. It is simply our aim to present important insights into this rarely discussed pilgrimage, which collectively allow for a partial modelling of the dynamics of the pilgrimage experience.

Our account then centres on our own retelling of the journey, but also looks beyond this to capture our experiences of the experiences of others. For, we did not walk the pilgrimage path alone, but along with hundreds of thousands of other pilgrims drawn from a wide range of different social and regional backgrounds. For ease of discussion, the pilgrims can be described as existing along a continuum: at one end are urban travellers that have been seduced by brochures of tranquil scenery and mythic tales of communion with nature, in a way that resonates with notions found in the Western-based deep-ecology movements (Laidlaw 2008). At the other end of the continuum lie rural pilgrims, for whom the journey is understood as an act of suffering undertaken in search of a blessing. The two ideologies increasingly collide on the pilgrimage route and are complicated by those of non-Indian tourists and trekkers who often reinforce the minority understandings of the urban based plains dwellers.

In this paper we present competing accounts of the Manimahesh pilgrimage of Cham-ba District in order to demonstrate how these ideologies clash on the trail path. Rather than attempting to portray the pilgrimage as a unified phenomenon, we acknowledge the heterogeneity of the pilgrim groups, and through descriptions of our own diverse experiences of the pilgrimage, demonstrate the way that those seduced onto the

pilgrimage trail, for rather distinct reasons, suddenly find themselves having to negotiate a landscape constituted by each other.

There is a significant, established, record of anthropological discussions of Himalayan pilgrimages (Bharati, 1978; Hausner, 2007; Sax, 1991) and many of these studies engage their discussions of pilgrimage with the Turners' now classical pilgrimage theories (Turner, 1973; Turner & Turner, 1978). Although we also engage with these theories, we seek to add something new to the ever-expanding literature on pilgrimage in this region. This is accomplished partly through our somewhat unique approach to writing about pilgrimage in this area (outlined above), partly through a focus on issues of landscape and finally through adding a description of this pilgrimage to the ethnographic record. Although the pilgrimage has not entered into academic discourse, it is an immensely popular pilgrimage, attracting a comparable number of pilgrims to the often-discussed Kedarnath and significantly more pilgrims than the prolifically analysed pilgrimage to Santiago.

Places such as Kedarnath come to stand in discussions of the Western academy for all Himalayan pilgrimage through a process of symbolic association. This has the habit of directing our gaze and causing it to fix on one aspect of life in the region. It is hoped that this paper can draw attention to other overlooked yet equally insightful aspects of Himalayan pilgrimage. In viewing the Indian Himalayas in a restricted yet powerful way, the Western academy is in harmony with the majority of India's plains dwellers (Bharati, 1978, pp. 78-102). This is because Himalayan landscapes in general (and certain Himalayan landscapes in particular) have become narrativised in profound ways. Therefore what we may term the "spatial speech act" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 98) of walking a Himalayan pilgrimage is always bound up with prior spatial oral and literary renditions. In 2009, we (Jonathan and Sukanya) entered into this discourse and travelled to an area known to many as Manimahesh, or the abode of Shiva.

Situating the pilgrimage

This Manimahesh peak is located in the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh, North India. Chamba valley, also known as the celestial valley, lies in a remote area of Himachal Pradesh, known locally as *Dev Bhoomi*, or the land of the Gods. From Chamba, pilgrims take the road to Hadsar, where footpaths take them up a further 2000 meters to the lake known as *Manimahesh Dal*, which is associated with the Hindu god Shiva and is said to have restorative properties. From here it is also possible to receive a *darshan* ('sacred contemplation') of the mountain *Manimahesh Kailash*, which overlooks the lake and is believed to be the residence of Shiva and his consort Parvati (Rutherford, 2000, p. 137). The name Manimahesh translates as the jewel of lord Shiva with Mahesh being another name for Shiva. When the sun shines on the snowy peak it creates the illusion of a sparkling jewel or *mani*, at the top of the mountain which can then be seen reflected on the surface of the lake.

The experience of such landscapes is affected by seasonality and although we lived at the time in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh our home was in an urban area (Shim-

la) in the southern quarter of the region. Like many Shimla residents, we travelled from our home to Manimahesh at a particularly auspicious time (in August) when it is said that bathing in the lake, which lies below the peak, is beneficial for both physical and spiritual health. By choosing to travel at this time, we chose to share the pilgrimage path with the majority of the 700,000 pilgrims who undertake the pilgrimage every year (Singh & Sharma, 2010, p. 2). This is partly because the peak is inaccessible for much of the year, partly because most choose to travel to the mountain during the propitious period when the chance to accrue merit from the journey is heightened, and partly because many villages build this travel period into the organization of their calendar year. The period for auspicious pilgrimage is rather limited and the exact dates may vary each year, but in 2009 they ran from the 13th to the 27th of August. The vast majority of the pilgrims are locals from the largely rural Himachal Pradesh and neighbouring Kashmir, but they are also joined by middle class urban Indians from the plains, a handful of VIPs consisting of politicians, gurus and businessmen, a smattering of western trekkers and, this particular year, a band of western eco-tourists who were intent on saving the holy mountain from the pilgrims. The route is treacherous and every year there are some fatalities, but on the whole people return with little more than a few blisters.

There has been a lot of discussion over the past 50 years about the relationship between tourists and pilgrims (MacCannell, 1973; Graburn, 1989; Smith, 1992; Badone & Roseman, 2004). The image of the 'pious pilgrim' has often been contrasted with that of the tourist as a 'superficial hedonist' (Badone & Roseman, 2004, p. 2). However, the general trend today is to no longer view these categories as binary opposites, but rather as complex and flexible categories, which complement and add to the understanding of the other (Eade, 1992; Nolan & Nolan, 1989; Nolan & Nolan, 1992). We believe that our contrasting experiences of the pilgrimage, when combined with accounts of others, suggest that (at least in this instance) the categories of tourist and pilgrim have some value in understanding the flow of people up the mountain. In particular, we will demonstrate that travellers on the mountain can be understood in relation to the way that they conceive of their relationship to the Himalayan landscape. While for some it is an exotic seductress, for others it is a faithful companion who is as much a part of their identity as they are of its. This understanding of the landscape allows the pilgrimage to reinforce both of two traditionally opposed concepts: pilgrimage as a source of 'communitas' (Turner & Turner, 1978; Turner, 1973) and pilgrimage as an area of 'contestation' (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). That said, it is important to note that the degree of contestation allowed by Turner and the degree of communitas allowed by Eade and Sallnow is not done justice in these simplistic caricatures of their respective approaches (Eade, 2000, p. xiv).

Setting out: A collaborative account

We joined this pilgrimage in 2009 and calculated the journey so as that we would arrive at the lake on the auspicious day of *Radha ashtami*. *Manimahesh dal* is a lake formed by glacial melt water, situated at 4,572 m above sea level in the Middle Himalayas, on the far eastern side of Himachal Pradesh, near the border with Kashmir.

Tourist books and brochures describe it as a pristine gleaming lake, surrounded by breath-taking wilderness (Mitra, 2007, p. 43). The lake is described in local folklore as the playground of Shiva and is considered the most sacred spot in the whole of the western Himalayas (Sharma, 2001, p. 101). Kinsley has suggested that 'Hindu spirituality is strongly geographical and involves learning how to read the landscape' (Kinsley, 1998, p. 228), and this more general statement seems to resonate with the way that stories told on this pilgrimage trail direct the pilgrim's gaze towards certain aspects of the landscape. A good example of this process occurred when we were stood at the Gaurikund camp contemplating the last leg of our trek up to the lake. An old man from nearby Bharmour noticed our exhaustion and encouraged us onwards to the lake above us by relating the tale of how the great God Shiva himself had bathed in the lake after the pain of *Daksha Yajna*. The term Daksha Yajna refers to a specific yajna (or sacrificial rite) performed by Daksha (Shiva's father in law) during which Shiva was humiliated and his wife (Sati) died (Sharma, 2001, p. 92). Many pilgrims relate stories connecting Shiva during his time of mourning and the pilgrimage lake, which focus on explaining the restorative and curative powers of the lake.

The old man also told us about the other corroborative myths that have reinforced the pilgrim's understanding of the lake as a holy site of healing, including the suggestion that it was a bathing spot for the semi-divine Pandava brothers and the site of the miraculous healing of a famous Raja of *Marudesh*. The Pandava brothers are mythical heroes whose exploits are often related orally and are recorded famously in the *Mahabharata* (Hiltebeitel, 2001). A young woman from Jammu also later described the lake as Shakti's *yoni* (divine womb), which fell here after *Daksha Yajna* and now stands next to Shiva's *linga* (divine phallus), which is Manimahesh Peak. Although often veiled in cloud a chance for a darshan (or vision) of the peak is another key reason for pilgrims to make the journey and the pilgrims say that it only the deserving who catch a clear glimpse of the sacred peak. These kinds of narrativisations of the landscape create a connection between past events and present actions that direct our understanding of, and engagement with, the landscape as we reconstitute it.

The lake not only generates connections across time, but also highlights key points within the timeframe of the calendrical year. There are generally considered to be two auspicious days for taking the holy dip in *Manimahesh dal*, and on these days many believe that Shiva himself comes down from his home on nearby Manimahesh peak in disguise and bathes with the pilgrims. The first of these is known as *Krishna Janamashtami* and is restricted to Hindu holy men, the second of these known as *Radha ashtami*, is open to everyone. We decided to travel on *Radha ashtami* after being told by several local Shimla residents that this was the appropriate time to undertake the pilgrimage. This date seemed most suited because we were informed that the God Krishna and his female consort Radha had once visited Shiva at his home in Kailash and they went together to bathe in the Manimahesh lake. Shiva pleased with the company of Radha and Krishna made a Divine decree that any ascetic who bathed in the lake on that date, later known as *Krishna Janamashtami*, would be given a boon.

Despite Shiva's benevolence, the exclusivity of the boon troubled the more grounded Radha who could not hide her distress from Shiva who, in order to appease her, decided that any common man who bathed in the lake on the day of *Radha ashtami* would also receive a boon. Inspired by these oral narratives, we decided to band with the commoners and undertake the ritual bath on *Radha ashtami* despite the tourist board warning us that it was the worst time to visit because of the sheer mass and volume of pilgrims. So, five days before *Radha ashtami*, we set out by car from our home along what passes for a national highway in the hills. After two days' travel, we began picking up the pilgrim route as our car headed onto increasingly minor roads as it wound its way towards the city of Chamba.

As we neared Chamba, we drove along the narrow winding mountain roads past bands of devout wandering pilgrims, food stands offering pilgrims respite, and swerved around coach-loads of singing pilgrims. An overnight stop in the city allowed us to see the pilgrims gathering, ready for the trail. Some travelled by private car like us; others travelled in large groups by coach; and still others walked – some solitary, others as entire villages herding animals. The latter group are the famous Gaddis, a nomadic people who count the valleys and passes around *Manimahesh dal* as their home (Bhasin, 1988). At Chamba, we mingled with the other pilgrims and locals and asked them about the route ahead. Everyone had a story to tell about the pilgrimage, and many related the sorts of myths that we have already discussed. However, when it came to practicalities about how to organise camping, and whether it was possible to hire tents, or get clean water, people became very vague and would simply relate that with faith anything was possible. This troubled Jonathan and he found, in a way that echoes Nancy Frey's Camino pilgrims' accounts (1998, p. 50), that the relinquishing of control that the pilgrimage required was in opposition with his understanding of what a journey into the mountains should involve.

**Walking
with others:
Jonathan's
account**

At sunrise our driver woke us and we travelled on towards Bharmour, which is said to be the place of judgement for the Gaddi's soul after death (Sharma, 2001). But here I was more concerned about the increasing degradation of the road than meditating on the judgement tree. The road from Chamba onwards had been a narrow chalk road, prone to being blocked by landslides and increasingly blocked by the throng of pilgrims on foot and parked vehicles. Although in theory the path was motorable for another 12 kilometres, in practice our driver could go no further and so we set off walking, along the road past the helicopter pad, which during the pilgrimage ferries VIPs to the top of the mountain in an instant.

For us the journey was just beginning; along with hundreds of thousands of other pilgrims, we would spend the next couple of days walking along increasingly unmanaged and steep rocky trails until we finally reached the lake at the top. At times the journey was an ascent up nothing more than a series of boulders, known locally as the *Bandar ghat* since you have to climb them like a monkey (*bandar*); the altitude would attack our heads, the incredibly steep and arduous climb tax our bodies. However I was pre-

pared for all this, as I had done a bit of trekking before, and, if anything, found the challenge exciting. What I was not prepared for was the effect that the sheer mass of people would have on the landscape. We were in the company of thousands of people travelling barefoot, singing, jostling, some with animals, some smoking cannabis, others naked, some missing body parts, others smeared in ash. The empty mountain vistas of the tourist brochures were completely unrelated to the crowded, noisy, and packed procession of people up the mountain. Of course in theory I knew that the mountainside would be crowded and indeed had opted to travel at this time partly to journey with others; however, the unnerving reality of that experience was something that I had not properly understood before setting out. The noise, sight and smell of so many people and animals together were at times bewildering. The trail was narrow and rocky, with few places that people could stop to relieve themselves, and so wherever a possible rock or resilient shrub appeared hundreds of thousands of people had tried to take advantage of it – a reality that is central to the experience yet seldom appears in pilgrims' accounts.

Likewise, my balance was upset by the rest stops at *Gaurikund* and *Dhanchow*, both associated with famous mythical events and said to be places of extreme natural beauty. Rest stations had been set up with a mixture of free and paid shelters for pilgrims. Free hot food was available from *langars* (communal food stalls) and cold snacks could be purchased for a reasonable fee from shops. When we arrived, the places were slick with a sludge made from what smelt like combination of human waste, animal waste, and mud. In order to achieve spiritual purity it seemed one had to literally wade through human pollution. Dumont famously suggested that conceptions of pollution lie at the heart of Hindu religious practice (1980, p. xxxix). While this may be something of an overstatement (Bayly, 2001, p. 15) there can be little doubt that for many Hindus the pilgrimage route forces the compromise of normal practices of purity. This spiritual model of pollution is of course not the same as the conceptions of pollution that are increasingly held globally by educated elites (Tomalin, 2002); however, on the pilgrimage trail people holding both of these views are forced into situations that involve experiencing pollution in search of purity and this shared experience cuts across the very divisions that heighten its presence.

At the camps, people jostled for some protection from the elements in large communal tents. Securing accommodation in these was not easy and required contacts; were it not for a local we had befriended on the route, we would have failed to find accommodation – a fact that was made clear when we tried at first to secure accommodation on our own and were turned away from every tent. Appeals to money were no use; here on the pilgrimage, something else mattered more. It was only after a local friend came to our aid that we were able to find accommodation through him in one of the crowded makeshift tents. Securing communal shelter on the pilgrimage, then, depended on connections and contacts that existed prior to the pilgrimage itself.

Along with humans (of all ages and genders), goats and horses plied the route up to Manimahesh, the former accompanying local tribals and the latter carrying slightly

overweight, well dressed, men, from nearby urban centres. The goats (both before and after slaughter) added to aspects of the pilgrimage landscape that some on the trail viewed as unsanitary, whereas the horse riders frequently annoyed the walking pilgrims, who would mutter things about the riders' lack of faith. For these hardened hill walkers, the horses, like the helicopter, were considered to be inauthentic modes of travel (Starkie, 1957).

I was not the only one to have been caught off guard by the effect that the vast number of people had on this usually remote landscape. Other urban, middle class Indian Hindus that I spoke to on the route had similar views. One group of twenty-something males who had travelled like ourselves from Shimla said that they would have preferred to journey into the mountains in search of what for them was a more real encounter with the abode of Shiva in a more isolated and peaceful part of the Himalayas. Another group of similarly aged males, from the city of Delhi, related that they were "completely disgusted" by the whole thing and had not expected that so many pilgrims would make such an arduous trek. They said that they were not really practising Hindus, but loved trekking in the mountains, where they felt that it was possible to spiritually connect to the wilderness. They had been enticed onto this trek by a tourist brochure that they had picked up in the nearby hill station of Dharamsala, and decided to undertake it despite the tourist board's warnings that the pilgrimage would make the journey less pleasurable.

During the pilgrimage, I did not see another westerner on the route, yet I felt that I was treated the same as any other person from an urban area of India and at no point felt singled out on the basis of my race. As a non-Hindu, I was allowed without reservation to take part in all the rituals in which the urban Indians took part. After the pilgrimage, I came to know of a few western tourists who had travelled on the pilgrimage in previous years. They all had similar, if anything stronger, reactions to mine with regard to the effect that the people had on the place. Some stated that the people were ruining the mountain; that although it was not their fault, they needed to be educated in how to care for the environment.

In 2010, for the first time a young woman, from near my hometown in the U.K., attempted to do just that. Known locally as "the garbage girl of Himachal Pradesh," she and a group of largely Western and urban Indian volunteers attempted to *teach* people to respect the mountain by disposing of waste in special waste management and recycling centres that they established along the route. They reported that the attempt was largely a failure; however, they plan to return with a larger group this year and hope to have a greater impact on the landscape of the pilgrimage.

**"Betwixt and
between":
Sukanya's
journey**

There were multiple motivations for me (Sukanya) joining Jonathan on the Manimahesh *yatra*. Having never been on such a long and difficult pilgrimage before, I was seduced by the promise of a spiritual experience combined with the thrill of a Himalayan mountain adventure. The remote and challenging location, the rugged natural

charm of the region, and the myths associated with the place all added to my curiosity about Manimahesh. I had imagined it as more of a personal quest, and found myself at times resentful of sharing the Himalayan landscape with large, noisy crowds of people. The sense of dislocation suffered during the pilgrimage was due to a gap between my imagining of it as an existential journey, and the reality of the intense, multi-sensory experience.

The idea of pilgrimage as a personal exercise performed within a sacred landscape is in line with other investigations into Indian pilgrimage which Dube summarises as having revealed three related central phenomena: "the divisiveness implicit in everyday social relations is preserved in pilgrimage, that the performance of certain rituals at the sites reinforce social structure, and finally, that pilgrimage is often an individual and not a group ritual" (Dube, 2001, p. 12). Furthermore, my experience also resonates with Bharati's classical study of Himalayan pilgrims from the plains, which found that even after pilgrimage many plains dwellers still described the mountains in an essentialised, mythicalised and unrealistic way (1978, pp. 77-80). The difference between my experience and the findings of Bharati's study is that I was unable to direct my gaze towards elements that coincided with my prior understanding to such an extent that I could ignore the diverse and sometimes disturbing reality.

The pilgrims we encountered were largely dressed in traditional Indian clothes and often looked ill-equipped to climb up the rocky terrain. Despite the lack of camping gear and bad footwear (they often walked barefoot), the pilgrims were driven on by their faith and seemed to be oblivious to the harsh terrain and the steep ascent to the lakeside. The company of these eager pilgrims inspired me to keep going despite the thinning mountain air and hostile conditions. The temporary shacks selling food and water that lay interspersed along the route were indicative of the entrepreneurial skills of local tradesmen. The locals also posed as horsemen and coolies in order to make a living out of the pilgrimage. The commercial motivations of the tradesmen did not seem to detract from the religious event. In fact, it seemed to be a symbiotic and profitable relationship they had with the mountains and the pilgrimage.

Just as Iravati Karve, during the Pandharpur pilgrimage, which Turner has famously discussed (1973, p. 219), experienced a loosening of caste and gender divisions, I, for the major part of the journey, felt that the constraints of caste and gender were worn lightly. For those choosing to walk up the steep, narrow, and often slippery mountain paths the experience was more or less the same. The local women often carried their bags on their head and kept up easily with their male counterparts. Most could speak Hindi and those returning from the pilgrimage would stop to chat in a way that suggested familiarity, despite being strangers, at various rest stops. It took us nearly eight hours to reach *Gaurikund*, which was our final stop for the first day. It is the place where only the women pilgrims bathe, following in the footsteps of Shiva's consort Parvati/Gauri who, an old lady from Jammu told me, had stopped in the lake there for a ritual bath. Shiva and Parvati/Gauri are considered to be in an ideal marital relationship, and the women bathing at the spot pray for "conjugal bliss and longevity"

of their marriage (Sharma, 2001, p. 108). This ritual is reserved for the ladies as they bathe in the privacy of the pond and renew their commitment towards their partners. This departure was unusual for the pilgrimage but was perhaps more in line with the traditional gendered rituals of Hinduism with which I am familiar.

My position *vis-à-vis* the other pilgrims was different to that of Jonathan. Being both an Indian and a Hindu made me something of an insider. However, as Narayan (1993) has noted, being an Indian and a Hindu does not necessarily mean that the researcher sees the world the same as the Indian Hindus that they are researching. Indeed, my urban upbringing, my regional difference and my secular education set me somewhat apart from the local populace. I found myself located somewhere in-between the two ends of the continuum and felt at times more like a modern religious tourist identifying more with the urban populace's disgust with the teeming crowds and the lack of sanitary amenities. The pilgrims in general did not seem to mind the inconveniences of the pilgrimage site. Despite my misgivings about the material conditions of the journey, I was nevertheless keen to complete this important rite of passage and experience the joy of completing the arduous trek up to the divine lake. I was able to bond with the urban trekkers yet I also felt connected to the local *yatris* when I joined in with their singing, chanting and bathing together. The company of my fellow pilgrims kept my morale high and infused me with a greater sense of purpose. My liminal position gave me a certain degree of flexibility with regard to the performance of rituals. While I was sceptical about the curative powers of the muddy lake water, I could not help but be moved by the powerful vision of the Manimahesh peak towering over the landscape, like a beacon of faith. The shift of perspective from the crowded lake upwards, to the majestic solitude of the snow-clad peak, was a key part of the transformative experience.

Theorising the pilgrimage

In our discussion of the pilgrimage, it is clear that several key factors (modes of transportation, size of journey, gender and understandings of pilgrimage) divide the pilgrim's journey and generate a sense of inequality or difference. This seems to reinforce the many studies of pilgrimage in the Himalayas (Sax, 1991; Van de Veer, 1988), which have, in turn, reinforced Eade and Sallnow's suggestion (1991, p. 4) that Turner's ideal of *communitas* – levelling and bonding of all participants – being the fundamental objective of pilgrimage is overly simplistic. At the same time, as Raj (2002) has more recently noted, *communitas* is not entirely absent from Indian pilgrimage. After their ritual bath at the *Manimahesh dal* the pilgrims establish a bond or *mitri* with a fellow traveller by anointing their foreheads with a symbolic *tilak* or sign from the waters of the lake. This expression of *communitas* occurs at the sacred spot as the pilgrims embrace each other in the hope that they might be reborn as siblings in their next birth on the condition that they never meet in this life (Sharma, 2001, p. 115).

The nature of the Manimahesh pilgrimage means that most of the pilgrims, most of the time are for the central section of the journey (Hadsar onwards) bonded together through a shared experience. Regardless of caste or class, most pilgrims are forced to

endure the same suffering and the same levels of physical pollution in order to receive the spiritual purity at the end of the journey. Unlike other Himalayan pilgrimages (Sax, 1991), gender is not a key differentiating factor for most of the journey. Men and women walk, sleep, eat and pass waste together in the same conditions – only at the very end do they separate for the bath that marks the end of the pilgrimage, and with it the return to the normal (often gender-divided) way of life (Turner, 1973, p. 219; Mathu, 2008).

There are, however, ways to trade on what Bourdieu has termed "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1983; Bourdieu, 1993) in order to gain privileges that are not open to everyone, and this is most marked in the method of transportation. The vast majority walk up the hill, but a small minority ride on horses, and an even smaller minority fly directly to the top in a helicopter. Although it seems as though, because of their combined cultural and economic capital, they are receiving the same spiritual blessing with less effort, the majority of pilgrims do not believe that taking these short cuts yields the same results. Many of these pilgrims follow the understanding of pilgrimage set forth in the *Rig Veda*: "like the heels of the wanderer/ His body groweth and is fruitful: / All his sins disappear, / Slain by the toil of his journeying" (Bhardwaj & Lochtefeld, 2004, pp. 489).

From such a perspective, those who trade on reserves of cultural and economic capital – at the same time as lessening the suffering of their journey – also lessen the rewards of the journey. They may receive more cultural capital in return for the cultural capital that they use to allow them to complete the journey, but from the perspective of the majority of pilgrims, they undoubtedly fail to receive spiritual capital (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2010) in exchange for their journey. Different groups draw on differing concepts of spiritual capital to validate their journey, and diminish the value of those who are seen to take the easier route. As such, we see the majority united in an attempt to invert the normal power structures of society. Although a sense of the importance of suffering unites all of the other pilgrims' understandings, the understanding of what that suffering should properly entail varies considerably. Furthermore, the understanding of the sort of connection needed with the mountain in order to vitalise the spirit is also contested on this pilgrimage.

The upper class pilgrims described above are an extreme minority on the pilgrimage, but there is another larger minority who are also distinguished from the majority – this time not by the way that they go about the pilgrimage so much as how they understand their experience. These are people normally from urban areas of India who are seduced into coming to this remote part of the Himalayas with what may be called a more tourist understanding of the region. They are often enticed by glossy brochures, depicting landscapes devoid of people, into coming to a place that they feel will give them a spiritual connection by removing them from an environment forged by humans and connecting them to a natural environment forged by the Gods. For these people, the landscape of the Himalayan mountains is, at its most extreme, viewed simply as a backdrop, a place that Divinity dwells and people travel to behold but do

not constitute. This has resonances with Ingold's recent suggestion that urban dwellers in general are so accustomed to paved surfaces that they have forgotten that human movement naturally leaves a trace (2011, p. 44). For such urban dwellers, Ingold suggests, nature is for visual contemplation but not for physical engagement; any trace of human action in such an environment is therefore viewed as defacement (2011, p. 44).

This urban understanding of the pilgrimage landscape is in striking contrast to that of local pilgrims, who we may situate at the opposite end of our continuum. For these rural people, the mountain is a life-world (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008), and the pilgrimage is part of the seasonal constitution of the natural (sacred) landscape (Escobar, 2001, p. 151). These people are familiar enough with the area to understand that they (in Ingold's terms) constitute the landscape at the same time as it constitutes them (2000, 2007).

For trekkers, urban pilgrims and western tourists suffering in the form of physical pain is acceptable, but suffering in the form of exposure to both physical and social pollution is extremely disquieting. It is for this reason that the tourist board tries to dissuade people from going during the pilgrimage, knowing that this latter kind of pilgrim – what Shalini Singh has recently termed the "true pilgrims of our age" (2006, p. 217) – will be happier if they can imagine the place without people. This situation has parallels with the distinction that Urry makes (1990, pp. 45-47) between tourists with a collective gaze and those with a romantic gaze. However, we are keen to stress that here there is a further distinction between tourists who are ocularcentric and pilgrims who are more multisensory. Indeed, both sets of people (the local villagers/tribals and the urban pilgrims/eco-tourists) are united when, after bathing, they stand and gaze together at the Manimahesh peak. All seek a kind of *darshan*; they desire to gaze upon the mountain and have it gaze upon them; however, for one group it is enough to simply gaze at the mountain as a backdrop and know that they have stood in the shadow of it, while for others gazing is only part of a completely embodied experience of the mountain, which includes experiences of (and with) human and non-human, terrestrial and Divine beings. This second group does not simply seek to gaze on the mountain; rather, they seek to be felt by and feel the mountain. They seek to become one with it.

These groups do not exist in isolation of each other, but rather constitute each other's pilgrimage with varying levels of impact and design. The most recent manifestation of this is the introduction of the presence of the Mountain Cleaners charity group, an organisation founded by Westerners and supported by mainly urban Indians with a desire to sanitise the landscape of the pilgrimage. On the one hand, the approach of the Mountain Cleaner's seems to be disappointingly dismissive of indigenous understandings of landscape formation and maintenance, with troubling undercurrents of a sense of superiority. Yet, (as Nelson Graburn recently suggested to us in a private communication) the landscape of the pilgrimage does continue to change, and the local tribals and villagers who throng the hills are in need of developing effective ways of engaging with a place that is transforming around them. For the pilgrimage is not simply

constituted by groups who travel separately and remain apart; the groups are bound together by having entered into the weave of the pilgrimage landscape, just as they will later add to the oral and literary discourse surrounding it after they return home.

It is not simply enough to say that the groups of pilgrims are, in effect, walking separate pilgrimages and returning to separate lives, for there, on the pilgrimage trail, they all in their different ways form the landscape of the pilgrimage for its duration and after they have left they have all in distinct ways left the trace of their movement across it. Even if they seek to minimise that trace and wipe the mountainside clean of historical action, as the Mountain Cleaners do, this action itself generates the ever changing, multivocal, nature of the pilgrimage landscape.

Mingling footsteps

The landscape of the *Manimahesh Yatra* is then a polyrhythmic composition of processes, where the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate, the physical and the mythic are joined through the act of walking. We see here a sort of *communitas*, which somewhat supports Turner's general theories. However, we also see it very much as an area of contestation, as differing narratives compete to be heard at times creating a discord. The mountain during the pilgrimage has to try and be a loving wife to some and virgin seductress to others and in our experience it does manage to hold these tensions together through the rhythm of movement. Yet, the contrasting nature of these conversations with the mountain leaves its trace. The landscape caters to a variety of clients and is shaped by each of them in turn.

The blending of connection and conflict that we experienced on the journey resurfaced not only during our retelling of the pilgrimage story to our neighbour, but also presented itself at the time of writing and analysis. Instead of suppressing this, we have demonstrated the way in which these connections and conflicts are integral to the constitution of the pilgrimage landscape both spatially and verbally through the method of collaborative auto-ethnography. This article, then, is itself a part of the ongoing processes of connections and conflicts that lie at the heart of the Manimahesh pilgrimage.

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